The LAND of BIG RIVERS

A. M. Chisholm

THE LAND OF BIG RIVERS

The Land of Big Rivers

A Story of the Northwest

BY

A. M. CHISHOLM

Author of "When Stuart Came to Sitkum"

CHELSEA HOUSE

79 Seventh Avenue New York City

Copyright, 1924
By CHELSEA HOUSE

The Land of Big Rivers

(Printed in the United States of America)

All rights reserved, including that of translation into foreign languages, including the Scandinavian.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Hard Citizens	11
II.	New Neighbors	27
III.	Ballou's Tillikum	43
IV.	What the River Brought	57
V.	Dead Men's Bones	69
VI.	The Factor's Story	81
VII.	Preparations	93
VIII.	Voyageurs	110
IX.	Ahtikamag	122
X.	Failure	138
XI.	Louis Beef's Grip	150
XII.	Forestalled	159
XIII.	The Cache	170
XIV.	I Play a Lone Hand	181
XV.	Ballou's Explanation	193
XVI.	Ignace Mountain	208
XVII.	Homeward Bound	218

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVIII.	Treachery	229
XIX.	The Stand-off	240
XX.	The Night Attack	248
XXI.	In the Enemy's Camp	255
XXII.	My Get-away	271
XXIII.	Rounded Up	288
XXIV.	In the Moonlight	298

THE LAND OF BIG RIVERS

CHAPTER I

HARD CITIZENS

IF it were not for Peggy I should not write this story at all. Peggy is my niece, and I am very fond of her and she knows it. So when she got the idea in her glossy young head we both knew very well what would happen; although I objected that there was no woman in the story except that other Peggy who, being my sister, did not count, and the klootchman Cecile who was most certainly not a heroine. But Peggy overrode me grandly by saying she was tired of wilderness heroines who crop up where no white man would think of taking a woman. There was something in that. But I protested further that though I had told the yarn often enough it was quite a different matter to write it.

"Bosh!" said Peggy. "Write it just the way you tell it."

So I was up against the iron there, too. I do not know just how to make a proper literary start, but as with most other work, perhaps the main thing is to get started somehow.

My name is Robert Cory. I do not remember my mother. My father, who taught history in a college which it is not necessary to name, died when I was a little shaver; and when his friends came to dig into his affairs they found that he had very little money, and no insurance, and only one relative on earth so far as they could ascertain, a brother who lived in the widerness that fringed the Carcajou. And so my sister Peggy and I, two forlorn little waifs, were packed off to him, and no doubt everybody was glad to be rid of us.

Now, our Uncle Fred, though college bred like my father, had been a rolling stone. But finally he had taken up land on the Carcajou, in the belief that it would some day be valuable, and of course as everybody knows now he was right. But at that time he was land-poor. He had several thousand acres of farm and timber lands on which he was hard pressed to make even the small payments required by the government, but often he had not enough money to buy flour.

He worked a scant thirty acres with the help of one man, a slow-moving, lanky, one-eyed Scandinavian, named Gus Swanson. This gave him subsistence. And for more he waited till the march of settlement west and north should strike him, and the slow years never shook his faith which has since been amply justified.

"They've got to come," he would say. "They can't help it. This is the last new land—good land —left in America. The prairie will fill first and then they'll hit us. I've got a fortune in timber, and when that's cut there's the land. I'm on velvet if I can hang on."

Few shared his confidence, but he hung on grimly, being considered remarkably perverse, self-willed and obstinate. He was a small man, with a close-trimmed gray beard, quick and restless in his movements, with a soft voice and gentle manner which gave strangers quite a wrong impression, for he had a fighting temper like a terrier. But he was kindness itself to us. Peggy was his favorite, and from the first she could twist him around her finger, just as the other Peggy now twists me; and to me he was more like an elder brother than an uncle.

And so, you see, as a boy my life was bounded by the Carcajou. I had only faint recollections of anything different. Its waters and bordering forests made up my world, with which I was very well content. In summer, when old enough, I helped in the garden and fields, and fished and gathered wild berries in season for Peggy to do down against the winter. And in winter I fished through the ice, and set my small line of snares and traps for rabbit and muskrat and mink and fox; and even

for the great, silver-gray, soft-footed, tuft-eared lynx. Now and then I took a prize such as a marten, and the sale of skins kept me in ammunition and more traps; and at last, after careful saving, a repeating rifle. I remember still how proud I was when I first filled the magazine with its snub-nosed cartridges and set out, thinking myself now a match for moose or bear, or the tawny, slinking mountain lion whose great pad tracks I saw now and then in the deep snows. And for that matter I was a deadly shot, principally because I had always been forced to weigh the price of a cartridge against the result of it, and nothing teaches close holding better than that.

And yet it must not be supposed that Peggy and I grew up like young savages. We had our school books and our regular hours for study, and our uncle taught us, having been, no doubt, at much pains to brush up his rudiments. For me this was well enough, but I recall that at times when Peggy was shooting up into a well-grown girl Uncle Fred would look at her for minutes at a time with worry in his eyes.

"Sweetheart," he said to her once, for he seldom called her by her name, "you are outgrowing me. You'll be a woman before I know it."

"But I'll always be your sweetheart, uncle dear," said Peg.

"Till somebody else comes," he said with a little sigh. "But the point is that you are growing up. I'm dirt poor now, but I won't always be. Anyway, rich or poor, you've got to have a fair show. There are things I can't teach you—things that every young woman of decent stock should know."

And the upshot of it was that next year Peggy was sent East to a girl's school and we were very lonely without her. But meantime Uncle Fred sent for books and a banjo. I was amazed to hear him play and sing, for he had never so much as whistled. But he taught Peg the trick of the instrument after he had picked up a little of his old cunning, and would have taught me. But my fingers were all thumbs and my voice rough and hoarse; for though music thrills my very soul I am dumb of it as an animal. The desire is mine but not the performance.

In the long winter nights, when water and earth were bound by bitter frosts, and the distant voices of marauding wolves bristled the hair of old Nelse, our cross-bred hound, upon his neck so that he would raise his scarred, grim head from the bear skin where he lay and "Woof—woof!" deep and low in his throat, we would sit cozy and warm before the glowing stove and listen to my uncle's tales of distant lands—their cities, their wonders of art and science, their history and their wars.

These tales were my amusements, my theaters, my first excursions into the land of make-believe, whither we journey joyously in our first youth, and less and less as age claims us until at last the power departs from us.

But especially I loved the stories of war and adventure by land and sea. And I would go over them afterward of nights, tucked in my blankets but wide-eyed as a young owl, while the wind-driven snow slished and whetted against my window—roving with the old Phœnician galleys and the ships of the Vikings, sailing with Drake and Blake and Nelson—not to mention Kidd and Morgan and Blackbeard and Teach—tramping with the legions of Cæsar, riding with the hosts of Attila, and campaigning with the Iron Duke against the great Napoleon, and at last riding down the broad path of glory into dreamland with the mailed squadrons and rumbling guns of my conquerors.

Close neighbors, in those early days, were few. Here and there a hopeful pioneer had settled and built himself a habitation, but in the main the land lay as in the beginning. We had our supplies from Neepaw, a struggling border outpost three days up the Carcajou by canoe, and twice that by a bad pack trail. And a hundred miles to the north was Carcajou House, a post of the fur company, to me in the land of Romance.

Of Indians we saw plenty, Crees and Ojibways and Chippewyans mostly, who used the river by canoe in summer and by dog and snowshoe in winter. They were dirty, but friendly, and most of them were honest; at any rate they never stole from us. And though I have no particular love or admiration for the Indian—being under no delusions concerning him—my experience is that there are fewer thieves among them in proportion than among us whites. Which is the experience also of other old-timers.

After a while, as settlement spread upward from the south, there were more people passing on the river. Winter and summer they drifted up and down, hard, gaunt men for the most part, with seldom a woman or child—prospectors, trappers, lumberjacks, surveyors—the light foam of humanity that ever tips and heralds the advancing wave of settlement in the new lands.

Many of them, seeing a house and clearing where nothing but brush and beaver meadow should have been—and hearing the brave challenge of a rooster and the busy cackle of hens—halted and broke their journey upon us. Always they were ravenous for eggs, which Peggy sold at wonderful prices. In the main they were quiet and civil, and in the presence of Peggy when she was almost a woman, abashed and tongue-tied, a thing which is so of

most men whose companionship is principally masculine. To that rule, however, one day there was a notable exception.

On this day my uncle and Gus were absent. About noon two men landed from a canoe and came up to the house, and though they were hard-looking customers I asked them to eat with us, following my uncle's custom. One of them, the younger of the two, was a big, black-haired fellow, not bad-looking in a rakish sort of way, and as Peggy passed close beside him setting the table, he threw his arm around her, drew her to him and kissed her.

She struck him in the face, and as I jumped for my rifle which stood in the corner, the other man caught me by the collar. I do not know what would have happened, except that if I had got my gun I would certainly have shot the fellow who had kissed Peg. But at the moment when I was kicking my man's shins and, I am afraid, calling him names which I had no business to know; and while Peg was thrusting the other fellow back and striking at him with all her strength, there came an unexpected interruption.

"What's up here?" said a voice from the door.

At that, Peg's assailant let her go very suddenly, and I twisted loose from the grip that held me. Two strangers stood in the doorway. One was a

short, small, oldish man with a short gray beard and very blue, childlike eyes. The other was a man of about thirty, I should think, with a lean, hard face and red hair. His eyes, too, were blue, but there was nothing childlike in their expression. They put me in mind of fresh-cut ice, and his red brows were drawn down over them and his chin thrust out.

"He kissed Peg!" I cried.

"So that's it," said the red-haired man. "Nootka Charlie and Siwash George! Squaw men! Pah." He made a face of disgust. "That stuff may go with the klootchmen, Nootka, but not with white girls—not while I'm around. Don't make no move for a gun, now. What'll we do with'm, Ike?"

"Well," said he of the childlike eyes, "you know I've allus said it'd come to a show-down one of these days."

"Let her come, then," said the black-haired man. "I dunno what you're talkin' about. Me and George never lifted that winter cache of yours, if that's what's stickin' in your crop."

"Never mind about the cache, Nootka," the red-haired man returned. "We can settle that—and some other things—later. But just now I'm goin' to give you a father of a lickin' or you'll give me one. Come outside!"

They fought down by the landing, and in the

end Nootka Charlie took a bad trimming. His partner helped him into their canoe, and paddled off, while the red-haired man grinned after them from the bank. He himself was badly battered, but very cheerful. He washed himself in the river, and afterward came up to the house and ate the meal Peggy had prepared. His name, he told us, was Dinny Pack, and his partner's was Ike Toft. Peg made a fuss over his bruises and I think that stampeded him, for as soon as the meal was over he said they must be going, and hurried away from her thanks.

I went with them to the landing, but they did not take to their canoe immediately. Out of reach of Peg's gratitude they sat down and filled their pipes and smoked contemplatively, watching the brown current slip by.

I sat beside Dinny Pack and whittled a stick. Having conceived a vast admiration for his prowess I wanted to know more about him and his partner, and in particular I was curious as to the feud that appeared to subsist between them and the two men, Nootka Charlie and Siwash George. But in those days it was not considered good manners to inquire too closely into strangers' affairs, and so I did not like to ask. The older man, Toft, kept silence, sucking at his pipe, his childlike eyes never leaving the water; but Dinny Pack, after a while began

to talk, and gradually I learned that he and his partner were modern representatives of the ancient order of nomads. They had no fixed abiding place. Their range seemed to cover most of the vast and comparatively unknown area of the North. They knew its complicated network of waterways which are its highways, as a city man knows his streets.

In this land of big rivers they were entirely at home. They hunted and trapped and prospected, and now and then they guided prospecting parties or the like; but they seldom did any regular work, which I think they considered too hard, though their own was in fact far harder. In which respect they were not peculiar, most of us being quite willing to sweat at anything but steady employment, whatever that may be. Boylike I envied them this apparently carefree existence which seemed to me to be ideal.

"Some day I'm going to see all that country," I told Dinny Pack.

"It'll take you some time," he predicted. "She's a big country, kid; I ain't seen her all myself, by a jugful."

"I get tired sticking around here," I confided to him. "Nothing ever happens."

He nodded with understanding. "I was brought up on a little backwoods farm myself. Every kid wants to break away and see new country

and so on. Sure! But you ain't old enough yet, and you got a pretty good layout right here. So stick round, and get all the fun you can, and don't kick too much. You got lots of time. You'll be a man before you know it and long before your sister. Then if any feller gets gay with her you can handle him with your fists, instead of going for a gun."

"Well, I wouldn't have had any chance with those two," I apologized for my action.

"Of course you wouldn't. I ain't blamin' you. If you'd got your gun you'd have used it, I guess."

"I guess so," I admitted.

"Sure," he nodded. "If there's one thing worse than a real bad man with a gun, it's a kid with one. You savvy a rifle, don't you?"

"Yes," I replied, which was the fact. I had a good eye, the utter lack of nerves of boyhood, and the natural ability to coördinate eye and hand. Ammunition was scarce and costly and not to be carelessly expended, and that fact made for accuracy. Young as I was, I kept the house in meat. I don't mean that I was a wonder with a rifle, more than many other youngsters with similar experience and opportunities; but I had learned to use the weapon at the plastic age, and with shooting as with other things, the younger you begin the easier it comes.

"Well, you might have plugged both those pelicans and it would have been coming to them," Dinny Pack said. "A little killing would improve them a lot."

"Why?" I ventured to ask. He surveyed me for a moment with a blue eye which had suddenly grown brooding and hard.

"No reason why I shouldn't tell you," he said at last. "Somebody lifted a winter cache belonging to me and Ike, and put us up against it. We was up against it right, too. We think it was them, but we ain't sure—not sure enough. If we was——"

He did not conclude the sentence, nor was it necessary. For to "lift"—that is to steal—a winter cache in the North is to commit the unforgivable sin. And the reason is obvious. A winter cache usually contains a supply of food, ammunition, matches, absolute necessities to existence on which its owners may rely in emergency. These reserves are in the nature of practical life insurance. Their loss may mean death by starvation or cold. Hence one who lifts such a cache is beyond the pale—as he should be. I did not need to be told what would have happened to Nootka Charlie and Siwash George had Pack and his partner been sure of their guilt. Not that I rated Pack's partner very high as a combatant. He was a small man, old from

my standpoint, and very harmless looking. Privately I thought that two hard citizens such as the other pair would make him take to a tree. Pack seemed to me to be the warlike member of the firm.

"So that's the kind of men they are!" I exclaimed.

"Well, it's the kind we think they are," my new hero amended. "Anyway, they're no good, neither of them. They're squaw men, and though maybe that's a matter of taste there's sev'ral other things we don't like about them that you don't need to know about at your age. So I was glad to have an excuse to tie into Nootka."

"You gave him a good licking," I said admiringly, "and he's bigger than you are."

"Within limits," said Dinny Pack, "size don't count so much in a scrap. The thing is to have a good appetite for it."

"Ho!" I said. "And I'll bet he's yellow."

"Why?" Pack asked.

"A man that will lift a cache and get rough with a girl is bound to have a streak," I replied.

Dinny Pack shook his head.

"That don't follow, kid. Them book theories that a bully and a bad actor is a coyote at heart don't work out. He's just as apt to be a wolf. Mostly bullies and bad actors has as much sand as other

folks. You never want to tackle one of them on the theory that he'll quit."

"It's lucky for Peg and me that you happened along," I told him. "It might have been somebody that couldn't handle them. If it had been just an old man like Mr. Toft I guess they'd have laughed at him, and he might have got hurt."

He eyed me for a moment with a quizzical expression and cast a glance at his partner still engaged in contemplation of the river.

"You think Ike, there, would have been easy prey for that pair?"

"I guess so," I admitted. "There were two of them and he's only about half the size of one of them. He must be pretty old. And he doesn't look like a fighter."

Dinny Pack grinned.

"He sure don't," he said. "But, son, it don't do to go too much on appearances. Because a buzz saw's little and looks quiet when it's running it don't do to monkey with it. If I hadn't been here at all my partner would have been able to take care of any rough stuff that started. He'd have done it diff'rent from me—but he'd have done it. Fact is it's lucky for that pair that he wasn't alone."

He did not tell me how his partner would have handled the situation, and presently they got into their canoe and pulled out, Toft in the bow and

Dinny Pack astern, which trimmed the slim craft nicely, driving it northward with an easy, slinging stroke that sent them around a bend and out of sight in no time; while I turned back to the house, longing for the day when I should myself bend my knees in a canoe to the sweet service of the long trail, to find Peg and talk the whole thing over with her, and illustrate as best I could the blows with which Dinny Pack had taken the steam out of Nootka Charlie.

CHAPTER II

NEW NEIGHBORS

SHORTLY after this episode which I lived over and over, having conceived a vast admiration for red-haired Dinny Pack, we had two new neighbors, and their coming was in this wise.

By our landing, on the trail to it, was a rock or boulder which I considered a nuisance. It lay embedded in the earth upon a straight line to the landing itself, so that the trail swung out and went around it, and so did all who used the trail. It was not a very great inconvenience, but I chose to consider it as such, and I had several times requested help from my elders to get it out. But always they had been too busy with more important things. Finally I made up my mind to get rid of it single-handed, which would be a small triumph for me. My idea was to dig beneath it, lever it from its bed onto skids that I had cut, and so dump it in the river. And this program one day I began to carry out.

The first part of it went very well. I dug beneath it, set flat stones for a fulcrum, inserted a crowbar and bore down upon it. The rock moved

but my hold slipped and it settled back. I tried again, but I could not pry the rock clear out, and I saw that it would be necessary to wedge it up to get a fresh hold. But how to do that while I was bending my whole weight on the end of the lever was the question. I solved that by pinning a pole to the ground with stakes crossed above it and running a rope thence around the end of the lever. I bore down and made fast and jacked up the big rock with more stones. And then I found that I could not get a satisfactory grip on the rounded bottom without more digging, and if I dug more, the confounded thing would merely fall down in the excavation.

As I stood scratching my young head and beginning to wish I had never tackled the job, but too obstinate to admit myself beaten, I became aware of a canoe approaching, the afternoon sun flashing on the dripping paddle blades and the drip of them gleaming like spattered silver on the smooth surface of the river.

The canoe held two men, and as it came nearer I saw that it rode deep with a heavy load so that at the waist there was little more than a couple of inches of freeboard. Thus loaded, a canoe is below its speed lines and as unstable as a floating log; but in spite of that, its two occupants were driving it at a clip that laid a little white bone in

its teeth and sent a surging little wave from either side of the bow flare. When they saw our landing and me standing there, they came swinging in to it.

The man in the bow was tall—at least from the waist up, for he was kneeling—with a grave but pleasant face, a great, hooky nose like the beak of an eagle, and a gray beard that hung halfway to his belt. He reminded me of the pictures of the old prophets in our big Bible; but he was chewing tobacco industriously, which rather spoiled the likeness. He caught a post of our landing and gently checked the way of the canoe.

"Good day, son," he said pleasantly, nodding to me.

"Bo' jou', mon vieux," said the man at the stern paddle.

He was a tremendously thickset man, but not fat. His great chest arched out like the belly of a wind-filled sail, and it was covered with a veritable jungle of black hair plainly visible, for his shirt was wide open at the breast; as indeed I found out later, he wore it so save in the very coldest weather which he minded no more than a furred animal. He had a big head covered with curling black hair like the front of a polled Angus bull, and big, fierce, terrifying black eyes, in which there was yet something drolly mischievous and

childlike, as if he had never quite got over his boyhood, though he must have been well into middle age. As he spoke he stood up in the unstable canoe and I saw that he was slightly bowlegged and very long in the arms. With a quick certainty that barely disturbed the equilibrium of the little craft he transferred himself from it to the landing stage and stretched his great arms and limbered his knees.

"By cripes," he said, "she's long pull, dat. My knees, bagosh, she's feel lak ol' man's." And then he jumped in the air as lightly as a lynx, cracked his moccasined heels twice, and alighted springily on the balls of his feet, though his weight made the structure shiver. The man with the beard who had already eased himself out of the canoe stretched a little stiffly.

"This is Cory's, ain't it, son?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"I guess we're going to be neighbors," he told me. "My name is Ballou—Tom Ballou—and this is Louis Beef. You're Cory's boy, I s'pose."

"He's my uncle," I said. "Won't you come up and see him and stay for supper." For in those days hospitality was a matter of course with us.

"It won't put your aunt out none?" Ballou queried.

"My uncle isn't married and my sister looks

after the house," I told him. "She'll be glad to have you stay, of course."

"Hooraw pour la petite soeur!" said Louis Beef with enthusiasm. Of course his name was really "Leboeuf," but nobody ever called him that. "I'll forget w'at 'oman's cookin' she's taste lak. For sure I'm hongry, me."

"Louis is a good cook," Ballou informed me.

"I'll be one crazee fool I ever learn for cook," said Louis Beef regretfully. "An' for why? For because if mans she can't cook she don't have to; an' at night all dose man w'at don't cook she's jus' mak' camp an' rustle leetle wood an' she's t'rough. But de cook, by dam, she's nevaire t'rough."

As we started for the house they saw my engineering work.

"You been tryin' to move that rock?" said Ballou. "Sort of heavy for you, I guess."

"It slips back," I told him. "If I could only get it up on the skids——"

"I guess Louis can fix it for you," said Ballou.

The big Frenchman nodded. "Leetle rock lak dat —sure! You boos' on dat han'spike, Tom, so I get onder heem." And Ballou got a grip and bore down.

"Hol' heem dere," said Louis Beef and dug away a few shovelfuls of dirt. Then he got his hands

under the boulder, spread his legs wide, and his great body began to tauten with the slow certainty of a jack. Beneath his thin, sweat-clinging shirt I saw great slabs and ridges of muscle start into being. Suddenly he heaved, straightening his mighty back, and the obstinate boulder which must have weighed every pound of eight hundred, and perhaps a couple of hundred more, came clear. I mean he lifted it clear, and took a couple of steps with it, and dumped it on the row of skids I had prepared sloping to the river. On these he rolled it along till it disappeared with a mighty splash that rocked the heavily-laden canoe.

"I guess dat leetle rock she don't bodder you some more," he said, flirting the starting sweat from his forehead.

"No," I said gratefully; "thank you." And I added admiringly: "You must be awfully strong."

"I ain't strong moch no more," he said modestly. "I'm getting for be ol' mans, me." And he eyed me for a moment. "I guess," he said, "you don' nevaire hear 'bout my cousin, Onesime Lebel?"

"No," I admitted. Tom Ballou winked at me gravely, and I wondered why.

"My cousin, Onesime Lebel," Louis Beef stated, "she's pick up leetle rock lak dat an' t'row him on de middle of dat riviere—oui, by dam, yes!"

"Really!" I said, trying to keep incredulity from my voice. He fixed me with the stare of his big, fierce eyes.

"My cousin, Onesime Lebel," he said, "he's de mos' stronges' man w'at I nevaire see. One tam, long ago, w'en I'm young mans, I'm work on beeg steamaire w'at tow de beeg raf' of square timbaire. An' one day beeg storm she come up an' catch dat steamaire an' beeg raf' wit' more as forty shanty-mans dat drive de raf', jus' above some bad rapide. An' bagosh de hengine of dat steamaire she bus' up; an' de steamaire an' de raf' an' all de shanty-mans on de raf' dey start for drif' down on dose rapide. An' de captain he holler 'T'row de anch'!' An' dey t'row de anch', an' still she's drif'. An' he's holler, 'T'row de odder anch'!' An' still she's drif'; an' she's drif' till bagosh de mans on de raf' look right down dose rapide, wit' beeg rock an' wave lak wolf hongry for drown dem, for because de channel w'at de raf' ron mos' tam she's way over on de odder side.

"An' some of dose mans start for pray; an' some start for dreenk up w'at whisky dey got so she don't be waste. An' w'en de whisky is feenish dey start for pray, too; an' de beeg raf' an' all dose poor shantymans drif' nearer and nearer dose rapide.

"I'll be pray mos' awful hard w'en I hear de

raf' boss holler, 'Hooraw, boys, no more need for pray! Here come Onesime Lebel!' An' sure enough dere's my cousin Onesime Lebel in peakie boat wit' beeg rope. An' he t'row one end on de steamaire an' row back to shore, an' catch hol' of de rope an' brace hees feet; an' he's pull dat steamaire an' dat beeg raf' right up dat swif' current against de wind, an' snub her to beeg tree on de bank. An' all dose shantymans an' all dose steamboat mans holler 'Hooraw pour Onesime Lebel!' "

He stared at me with his big, fierce eyes. Tom Ballou chuckled.

"You don't need to say you believe him, son. It ain't expected."

"You don't want to mak dat boy t'ink I'm liar," Louis said in injured tones. "I know more as forty mans, if they ain't dead, would swear to how Onesime Lebel she save deir life dat tam."

"You know men that would swear to worse than that," said Ballou.

Louis Beef grinned. Subsequently when I knew him better he told me more startling feats of his cousin. In spite of his age, forbidding front and fierce eyes he was as playful and mischievous as a bear cub. And he was wonderfully active and tremendously strong.

They had supper with us, Louis pretending to get cookery lessons from Peggy, but really giving

her a few excellent hints, for he was a splendid camp cook. Afterward he helped her clear up and wash the dishes, and I could hear her clear laugh and his rumbling merriment.

Meanwhile my uncle and Ballou sat and smoked and seemed to get along very well. I gathered from their conversation that Ballou and Louis Beef had picked out a piece of land some miles farther along the river to which they were on their way with all the supplies their canoe could float. They declined my uncle's invitation to spend the night, and presently pushed on to their destination.

On the next day but one I got into my canoe, a light, slim and very unstable dugout in which, nevertheless, I was as safe as in a barge, and started up stream with a troll spinning astern as an excuse. I caught several fish, and finally hauled in my line and settled to the business of punching my little craft along on a visit to our new neighbors.

I knew the site of their intended location well, a beautiful, partially wooded flat with large openings, on the bank of the river. When I got within earshot I heard the steady "lick-lock" of axes, and when I landed at the little stage they had already built, beside which their canoe lay bottom up in the shade, I found them busy getting out timbers for a log house.

Louis Beef stood on a log which he was squaring with a broad ax. He hewed by judgment of eye alone, but his line was as straight as a stretched string and as smooth as if planed. Around lay other logs, and the sills of the cabin were already laid. He waved his hand to me, completed his job on that particular log, and jumped to the ground.

"Hooraw!" he cried. "You'll be jus' in tam for the buillon—wa't you call de mulligan."

"That sounds good," I admitted. "I brought you a few fish."

"That's kind of you," said Ballou. "Come on over to the camp and help us eat."

They had set up a lean-to and organized a fireplace, a shallow trench which already had abundance of ashes from the brush and trash they had piled there and burned, and ashes are a big factor in open-fire cooking. Louis built a quick fire at one end and hung the coffee pot above it. While the water was boiling he raked open the bed of ashes exposing a "Dutch oven," which is a round, cast-iron, shallow pot with straight sides and a heavy, close-fitting cover of the same metal. Steam rose from beneath the heavy lid, giving forth an odor delectable to a hungry boy. Louis set it to one side, and raked out a second oven, removed the lid and dumped out on a dingy piece of canvas

a beautifully browned loaf of sour dough bread. In rapid succession he dealt out tin plates and a mug each. Then he removed the cover from the mulligan.

There are mulligans and mulligans. This one contained as I recall it a wide variety of ingredients—partridge, rabbit, fish, pork, onions, potatoes, beans, and rice in a delicious blend. I gorged myself, and thought I had never tasted so fine a meal. The men laughed at my appetite and urged me to eat. When I could hold no more I lay back on the warm, dry grass, a healthy and happy young animal, and watched them fill their pipes, and tobacco smoke, mingled with the more acrid odor of wood smoke, drifted across my nostrils. And so I went sound asleep and did not awake even at the sound of their axes when they resumed work.

When I woke I went over and watched them, admiring their skill and the certainty with which they squared and notched and fitted. It fascinated me to see big Louis stand on a log and hew, the great blade of his keen, broad ax falling continually on a line that was less than an inch from his forward foot. Anything going wrong with the stroke might have taken off half his foot, but that did not seem to occur to him, or at any rate did not worry him. He held to the line with the accuracy of a machine.

"Did you ever cut yourself?" I asked as he relinquished the broad ax for the narrow ax and began to score a fresh log preliminary to hewing it.

"Two, t'ree tam w'en I'm young mans," he nodded. "Mos' everybody w'at use de hax cut hees foot some tam. But I'll be lucky, me. I don't nevaire split heem wide open lak some mans. I'm plenty careful 'bout clear 'way brush an' limb 'bove my head w'en I use de hax."

I do not know whether this conversation had anything to do with it, but at any rate five minutes later he uttered an oath and stood looking down at the toe of his moose hide moccasin which was suddenly dyed vermillion. He sat down and removed it. But his luck had held. The keen blade of the big, broad ax had merely sliced into the flesh of his big toe and taken out a section of the golden-brown leather of his footgear.

"I grow lots more skin," he said sadly, "but bagosh I don't grow moccasin. She's mos' awful bad luck, dat."

I told him I knew a Cree squaw who made good moccasins, and I would get her to make him a pair. He tied up his toe in a dirty rag which he soaked in kerosene from a bottle, dug up an old pair of winter moccasins which were larger to go over several pairs of socks, and went to work again. And I went home.

That was the first of many visits, and always they made me welcome. My uncle liked both men, especially Ballou, with whom he would sit and smoke and yarn by the hour; and Peggy and I had many a laugh over the wonderful exploits of Onesime Lebel, as related by his cousin.

Sometimes I stayed at their house over night, listening to Louis Beef spin yarns in his queer patois, not only of his mythical cousin and the lumber woods, but tales of the great wastes near the arctic sea, of the barrens where the musk ox ranged and the timber was stunted and dwarfed, of mountain ranges and unknown streams where the gold lay thick in the sands, and of the hard men who invaded these fastnesses.

No doubt he drew heavily on his imagination for incident; but equally there was no doubt that both he and Ballou knew this great and still almost legendary territory as few men knew it. Of the two, Ballou was the less communicative, but what he told me I believed, whereas I took Louis' yarns with several grains of salt.

The land they had taken up was very good, but they made scarcely any attempt to cultivate it, and were often absent for months at a time, prospecting, or trapping, or guiding some outfit, or on other business less definite.

The following fall there came to them an Eastern

gentleman named Fothergill, who desired to shoot moose and bear. Louis brought him up from Neepaw by canoe, and I chanced to be with Ballou when he arrived. We saw the canoe coming up the river, and it looked to be loaded deep. Louis was in the stern, of course, and Mr. Fothergill, a tall, stout, red-faced man, wielded the bow paddle. The canoe lurched and jolted in a manner very different from its usual smooth, easy progress, and I could see that this was due to the man in the bow, who swung his weight on the paddle with a side lurch, instead of as it should be fore and aft in line with the keelson.

He got out on the landing clumsily while Louis hung on, and shook hands with Ballou; and Louis looked relieved as he got out himself in his usual cat-footed way.

"Mo' gee!" he breathed, looking after his passenger who was walking up to the house with Ballou. "For sure I'm glad to get here wit'out to drown. Dat Foddergeel, bagosh, she don't know canoe from steamboat. If I ain't watch heem lak cat he's give us de dirty dump more as forty times."

"Is that outfit all his?" I asked, surveying the astonishing pile of dunnage in bags and boxes that sank the canoe below her running lines.

"Every las' dam pound, all but leetle pork an'

flour an' bean," Louis nodded. "He's got gun for shoot all de hanimal w'at live, an' cartridge for ron a war seven year, an' blanket for pass heem-self on de Nord Pole. An' w'at you t'ink? He's got rubbaire bed lak ballon, wit' air inside, w'at you blow up wit' leetle pump."

"Aw g'wan!" I exclaimed, for I had never even heard of a pneumatic mattress, and I thought he was merely telling me another tall one.

"Oui, by dam!" Louis asseverated, nodding earnestly. "She's true dis tam. An' besides he's got all sorts t'ing w'at I don't know dey're for."

Indeed Mr. Fothergill had brought with him a vast outfit of weapons and complicated and burdensome camping devices such as sporting goods houses sell to those who know no better. He was very proud of them and pleased to exhibit them, and very strange they were to me, whose camp outfit, when absent overnight, was merely a blanket, grub, and an ax. I admired them immensely, only I did not think that they were worth the trouble of lugging about.

Mr. Fothergill desired to be considered—as he considered himself—a great hunter and an expert woodsman; and Tom and Louis indulged him in this belief, and tried their best to give him sport and keep him from drowning himself and them, or meeting with some accident.

"He's paying for his fun," Ballou pointed out. "If he likes to think he knows more than he does, it's all right with me."

"All de same," said Louis, "I'm always scare' he's tak' me for moose or bear an' start for shoot. An' he's more troub' in de woods dan lettle baby. For because baby can't walk, an' you pack heem on your back an' you know where he be. But dat Foddergeel, he's turn 'round once wit' two tree between heem an' camp, an' by dam she's lost!"

But Mr. Fothergill came for two seasons and enjoyed himself hugely, never suspecting that he was considered a joke. He had plenty of money and paid them liberally. And I thought him very generous, for having a rifle of the same caliber as mine, he gave me his entire stock of cartridges for it; a most precious gift to a boy accustomed to pay for his own ammunition in skins of small value.

Such, then, were our early friends and surroundings, which you may perhaps think very commonplace and circumscribed; and you may think I have dwelt upon them unduly. But if I have done so, it is because if I am to tell this story at all clearly I must throw off the burden of the intervening years and see men and things as I saw them then; so that, perhaps, I may make others see them clearly, too.

CHAPTER III

BALLOU'S TILLIKUM

ON a certain spring morning, when I was rising eighteen years of age and grown into a strong, dour, silent lad given to solitary rambles and daydreams which I kept entirely to myself, I rose before the light and went out to get a deer, for at that time we observed no close season, killing as we needed meat; but we killed only bucks at that season, and of them no more than sufficed.

I slid silent-footed through the dawn fogs which rolled along the river bottoms, and the night dews on the brush soaked me to the hide. That I did not mind at all, being used to it; but the sun rose and gathered up the mists, and I saw no deer. Indeed it was past noon when I killed a small buck. And when I came to look around I found myself about seven miles from home, and but a couple from Ballou's. Therefore I decided that instead of packing part of the meat home I would take the whole carcass to Ballou's, and get him or Louis to paddle me back; in return for which I would, of course, give them a hind quarter if they could use it.

But when I arrived at their cabin, very hot from the weight of the buck and the roughness of the going, and being pestered by flies as well, brought by the scent of the blood, to my disgust I found no one at home.

I dumped my load on the bank beside their landing and lay down and drank from the river; and then I peeled off and dived in. Afterward I sat on the bank kicking my heels, uncertain whether to wait or to quarter up the buck and pack what I could over land. Finally I got out my knife, and as I did so, a canoe came down the river, but its occupant was neither Louis nor Tom.

I did not know him. He was an old man, lean and sinewy, bald, save for a fringe of hair back of his ears, with a weather-beaten face, a long neck wrinkled like a turkey's, and small gray eyes, very cold and steady. His canoe held a scanty outfit, but I saw a gold pan, and judged him a prospector. He drew in to the landing and caught a stake of it, while he glanced from me to the buck.

"How's chances to git some meat?" he asked in a high, nasal voice. "Give ye a dollar for a ham?"

"All right," I said. "I'll skin it out for you."

He put his weatherbeaten craft ashore and rose stiffly, a hand on the small of his back, and he swore as if it gave him pain. I observed that he

wore a gun belt, and the butt of a heavy revolver stuck out from a worn holster. This rather surprised me, for with us, belt guns were not common, though of course most men traveled with rifles, as a means of getting meat. He stretched himself on the grass and filled an ancient, charred pipe.

"I'd give a whole lot if I was as soople in the back as you be, young feller," he said as he watched me.

"What's the matter with your back?" I asked.

"Pretty close to seventy years," he answered with a wry grin. "Them, mostly, and a few kidneys and rheumatiz and things. Sho! What's the use of tellin' a kid like you? Your folks live here?"

"No, you passed my uncle's place about five miles back."

"Pretty gal there?"

"My sister."

"Well, she's good people," he declared. "Staked me to a mess of early greens and some spuds. Wouldn't take nothin' for it. Don't run in the family, though."

"I'd have given you a chunk of meat," I retorted, "but you asked for a ham. A ham's worth a dollar. If you think it isn't you don't need to take it."

He chuckled. "If it wasn't I wouldn't give it. Who lives here, anyway?"

I told him, and he straightened up with a smothered oath as his stiff back caught him.

"Tom Ballou!" he cried, staring. "Is he a big, skookum, brown-haired cuss with a hooked nose and a square chin?"

I told him that Ballou's hair was gray, and I didn't know what his chin looked like because he wore a beard. But he had a big nose and a trick of narrowing his eyes when he was in earnest about anything.

"It's him," he exclaimed, "sure as a gunsight! Course he'd be gray—I'd forgot that. And this here Louis Beef—is he gray, too?"

"Not a bit. His hair is black and curly."

"Head like a bull and chest like a bar'l?"

"That's Louis," I agreed.

"Them Frenchmen don't git gray 'count of so much grease in their wool," he said. "Nor bald. I never see a bald pea-jammer yet. Gosh! And to think of runnin' up on Tom and French Louis here! Where be they?"

But I could not tell him that.

"I'll wait," he announced, "if it takes a week." And he threw his outfit ashore, drew up his canoe and turned it over. "Now," he said, "we'll go up to the shack and cook us some meat. Tom an'

Louis here! Well, blight me standing! Who'd have thought it?"

"You know them?" I said.

"Well, *some*. We're old tillikums. Why, we was spreadin' our blankets together before you was born." And when we went to the cabin he looked around. "Nice shack they got. Nice and comfortable. Not so durn much, maybe, but more'n most of us old-timers can show. Most of us ain't got nothin'. What we got we blowed. How's Tom fixed for money? Pretty strong?"

I didn't know anything about that, and said so. And then he asked me how long they had been living there and where they came from before that, and my own name.

"My name's Hayes," he informed me, "Jack Hayes. S'posin' you rustle some kindlin's, Bob. You're sev'ral years younger'n I be."

When I came in with the kindlings he was nosing about in Ballou's belongings. I suppose my face expressed surprise and disapproval; for though any one in those days was welcome to enter a cabin in its owner's absence and use what he required, yet that very custom imposed certain obligations, and one was to mind his own business. But Hayes explained that he was looking for a needle to take a sliver from under his nail. I found one for him and he went to the door for better light

and picked the sliver out while I was busy with the stove. While I cooked and while we ate he asked continual questions about Tom and Louis. And afterward he filled his pipe again and lay on the bunk while I washed up, which I did with great care, putting each thing back where I had found it, as was the custom.

"You've been brung up right, Bob, I can see that," he approved. "Use what you want, but leave things as you found 'em. That was always the rule in the West. I see a man shot, once, for not cleanin' up after him. Served him right, too. Some folks is lazier'n a fat dog. But that was a long while ago. It's got so nowadays that shootin' anybody makes talk."

I thought he might have helped with the cleaning up instead of talking so much, but I reflected that he was an old man, and said nothing. Meanwhile a stiff wind had sprung up and the sky had clouded heavily. Looking out I saw Ballou and Louis fighting their way up to the landing against wind and current. Evidently it was hard work, for both bent to it with snapping, driving strokes; but nevertheless the canoe would not keep way, checking the moment the paddles left the water. I called Hayes, and he peered out at the rhythmically swaying figures.

"Sure that's them," he said. "I wonder if they'll

know me. They ain't seen me for years. I won't tell 'em who I am for a while."

Ballou and Louis made the landing, took a look at Hayes' canoe and came up to the house.

"Hallo, Bob," said Ballou, and nodded to Hayes.

"I've been sorter makin' myself to home," said the latter. "Been usin' your layout to cook me some muckamuck."

"Sure, that's right," said Ballou heartily, and yet with a puzzled note in his voice. He eyed Hayes for a moment and the perplexity crept into his face. "Old-timer," he said, "do I know you?"

"Well, now you mention it your face seems sort of familiar to me," Hayes returned. "We might have met some place." He chuckled to himself. "Now whereabouts do you s'pose it might be?"

Ballou's eyes narrowed, as he studied the other intently, but he shook his head. Hayes picked up his hat and put it on.

"Does that help any?" he said.

"Jackstraws!" cried Ballou.

"Well, by dam!" exclaimed Louis Beef.

"Surest thing you know, boys," chuckled old Hayes. "Jackstraws! Lordy, I ain't heard that name for so long I'd almost forgot it. Well, ain't you hyas yutl tumtum to see me again?"

If they were glad of heart they did not say so.

"Mo' Gee!" cried Louis. "I'll t'ink for sure you'll

be dead. How you'll stand off le diable so long, hey?"

Hayes grinned. "I'm a hard old bird, Louis. But to look at you a feller'd think you was a young man still. You got all that black wool yet, and Tom's hair is pretty gray while mine is mostly lost in the shuffle. Well, well! And to think of us meetin' up this way. It cert'nly is good to meet old friends again."

I had thought that the pleasure was mostly on his side, but Ballou welcomed him cordially enough. Louis cooked more venison, and he and Tom ate, keeping up a running fire of conversation with Hayes, chiefly concerning men and happenings quite strange to me.

Meanwhile the wind had increased to a gale, and waves crisped the river. It began to rain, in driven sheets which beat and slatted on the window. To get home by canoe was out of the question, and to go by the bush was decidedly unpleasant.

"You'd better stay the night," said Ballou. "Your folks will know where you are."

And so I remained. Darkness came, and we gathered around the stove, for the night was raw and chill. The men's talk continued, winnowing the years since they had met.

"Where's the Sailor?" Ballou asked.

"Where he ought to be, I reckon," Hayes replied.

"He got his up the coast, somewheres. There was a woman mixed up in it, I heard."

"Dat Sailor he's always got squaw some place," Louis observed. "One tam I tell heem hees luck don't last."

"Webfoot's gone mimoluse, too," Hayes announced, "and Irish Mike, and Hansen, and Fat Porky."

"So!" said Ballou. "And what happened to *them?*"

"Webfoot and Hansen was drowned on the Coppermine. Mike crowded some play too far in a joint in Seattle. Fat, he died sleepin' off a bust. Bad whisky, I guess. Speakin' of whisky—got any, Tom?"

To my surprise, for I had never seen him drink, Ballou, after a moment's hesitation, produced a demijohn from a cupboard. Hayes sniffed the neck with approval.

"Rum!" he decided. "Good hooch. It lays over rye an' Scotch an' such soft stuff. 'S a ho, Tom! The old boys and the old days!"

They had a drink and another. The smoke of their pipes filled the room. I grew sleepy and nodded by the fire.

"Better turn in," said Ballou. "Needn't wait for us. Take the new bunk in there."

He nodded toward the other room of the cabin,

and, very glad to accept his suggestion, I kicked off my moccasins, rolled up in a blanket and was asleep as quickly as a tired puppy. How long I slept I do not know, but when I woke some time in the night they were still talking, and their voices were loud. There was no door between us and I could hear plainly.

"It's a dead horse," Ballou was saying. "I'll go back no more. It's a waste of time."

"I guess so," Hayes agreed. "And now mebbe you see that we were right. We ought to have forced a showdown."

"Well, why didn't you?" Ballou returned. "You was growed up. Nobody was stoppin' you!"

"You was against it," Hayes stated. "We thought —some of us—that you was standin' in with him."

"You thought that, hey?" said Ballou coldly. "I notice none of you said so at the time. I guess you know better now."

"Oh, sure," Hayes admitted. "I'm just tellin' you what we thought. You got double-crossed the same as the rest of us." And he cursed some unknown person with venom.

"Well," said Ballou, "you can curse all you like, Jackstraws, but it don't do no good. Anyway, he was a man."

"You bet my life," Louis Beef affirmed. "He's

man, by gar, dat dey don't mak some more nowadays!"

"And that's true, too," Hayes admitted. "Only, if he's in hell where he ought to be, it's good bettin' that he's boss right now, and Old Nick merely a figgerhead."

"If dat's so, she's mak' dam poor lookout for you, purty soon, Jackstraws," Louis chuckled. "I bet he's lak to get hold of you. You be gettin' ol' man now, and all dried up. I bet you burn fine!"

Evidently this prospect did not appeal to Hayes, who attempted retort in kind at which Louis merely laughed provokingly.

"Dat's all right about me, ol'-timer," said he. "I be yo'ng man yet, alongside you, an' I got lots tam left. Mebbe I do good t'ing some tam, an' she count me game. An' then, of course, what mak' me better chance, I don't be dam Protestant. Je suis bon Catholique, moi, an' so I have a whole lot better show. Bagosh I t'ink I'm purty near stan' on velvet. But you're awful ol' man, Jackstraws. Purty soon you'll start for break up."

I suppose the liquor Hayes had drunk made him quarrelsome. At any rate with Louis' second reference to his age he seemed to lose his temper, and he cursed the Frenchman bitterly in a voice which heightened and shook in a sudden gust of rage.

Out of the sudden silence that followed, came Louis' voice, quite stripped of its jeering tone.

"Go easy, Jackstraws! I don't let no man call me dose t'ing! You say somet'ing more, now, an' for sure I wring your ol' neck!"

"I guess not," Hayes returned grimly. "You won't wring nobody's neck, you——" And he added a phrase quite unprintable.

Came a bellow from Louis, the crash of an overturned chair and the report of a pistol shot, shattering in that confined space. I leaped from my bunk to the doorway.

Louis had Hayes by the throat with his right hand, while with his left he held Hayes' right, which held a smoking six-shooter, toward the roof. For a moment they seemed to stand motionless, statuesque, in the white drift of the powder smoke which eddied in the lamplight, for this was in the days before smokeless powder had much favor. I knew that Louis with his tremendous strength could break Hayes in pieces. But as I looked, Ballou sprang in, twisted away the gun, and cursed them both for a couple of old fools. He saw me standing in the door, and scowled blackly, but only for a moment.

"Woke you up, did they, Bob. Well, there'll be no more of it. We're all going to bed."

His eyes challenged contradiction. To my sur-

prise the two combatants made no objection. They grinned sardonically at each other.

"Well, I guess I was too fast with my tongue and too slow with my gun," said Hayes. "In the old days you wouldn't have got your hands on me."

"Mebbe I'm leetle faster myself when I'm yo'nger," Louis returned. "I guess we have nodder leetle drink, an' hit dose blanket."

Ballou followed me to my bunk and, sitting down, began to unlace his moccasins.

"I'm sorry this happened when you were here, Bob," said he. "They got a jolt or so too much. However, they're good friends now. Still, I wouldn't want any one else to know about it."

"I won't say anything," I promised. "I don't talk much."

"I know you don't. That's one thing I like about you. You've got better judgment than a lot of men. I s'pose it was the shot woke you up."

"Yes, I guess so," I answered, which was not quite true, but eminently discreet, and anyway I had no idea what they had been talking about. He nodded.

"Well, don't say nothing about it. If it got around, your uncle might not like your comin' here, and I wouldn't blame him, though nothin' like this is goin' to happen again. And then I was thinkin' that this fall you might come along with us on a

hunt, and if he knew of this racket he might put his foot down on that."

Which made my silence absolutely sure, for a hunting trip in the hills had been my dream for years, and I would not imperil its realization. And as for telling Peggy, though she was as a rule my confidante, naturally there must be many things in a man's life of which he does not speak to his womenkind.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT THE RIVER BROUGHT

THAT spring I was very busy, for as it happened, Uncle Fred had sprained his ankle, and Gus Swanson's rheumatism laid him up for a week at a stretch, and so the bulk of the work fell on me.

There was the garden to be planted and the grain to be sown, and a patch of winter clearing to be broken and fenced, and a score of odd jobs done. And so I was hard at it from dawn to dusk; and though I was strong beyond my years I would nod over my supper and fall into a dead sleep immediately afterward.

Though I worked cheerfully enough, in my heart I loathed the labor. And while I worked, my thoughts were not of the tasks in hand; but of the fall, and camp fires in the hills, and mysterious, lonely waterways, and still, dark-fringed lakes where moose and caribou and deer drank in the dawn fogs and the cold dusks. So that since then, remembering that time, I have often wondered when I have seen a boy busy with a hoe or following a quiet old team down a furrow, what he was

really thinking about; and I have thought that if I could have looked into that boy's mind I should have seen some surprising visions. I suppose we all remember when summer, which is now reduced to a few flying weeks, seemed an eternity—a glorious, endless procession of golden days, each filled with fresh delights. But that particular summer, though it seemed endless enough in prospect, seemed also a vast, dreary, laborious gulf between me and my desire.

However, hard work will tell. Tasks which seem unsurmountable viewed en masse yield and finally vanish before steady plodding. And so there came a time when the new fence stood, and the raw soil of the fresh clearing lay uppermost, and the wheat and oats sprouted green in the drills; and in our garden the peas shot out delicate tendrils, and the potatoes pushed upward sturdy stalks of dark green, and all flourished.

Then I had breathing space to employ as I saw fit, and my inclinations led me to the water front where I drove fresh stakes and made a new log landing, and painted our two canoes; and sometimes sat for half an hour idle, my eyes on the ospreys wheeling against the blue, and the vivid, darting, chattering kingfishers, or watching the slow, brown current slip by. And so it happened one quiet afternoon that Peggy surprised me as I sat dream-

ing upon a log, rather to my disgust, for I did not like to be caught idle.

"Thinking great thoughts, Bob?" she asked, her hands upon my shoulders.

"I just sat down for a minute," I said rather sulkily. "I wasn't thinking at all."

"Poor old Bob!" she said, sitting down beside me. "You've worked hard, old boy, and I'm sure you've done a day's work already. I think I have, myself; and I'm not going to do a blessed thing more till suppertime."

Looking at her I saw that she wore a dress of blue, faded by many washings but fresh and crisp from the iron. The neck was low and open for coolness, and for the same reason she had rolled back the sleeves above her firm, round forearms. Her wavy, fair hair was done high on her head, but little wisps of it strayed about her ears, and the sunlight played hide and seek among them as if it delighted in the game. She smiled at me, and I noticed vaguely, as a brother will, the sweetness of her mouth, and the regularity and whiteness of her teeth, and the rich color which lay beneath the tan of her cheeks. For the first time it struck me that she was pretty; also that with her hair done that way she looked grown up.

"I never saw your hair like that before," I said.

"Do you like it?"

"Uh-huh—I guess so," I replied with brotherly indifference. "It makes you look taller, and sort of like a woman."

"Well, I *am* a woman."

"You're just a girl."

"I'm almost twenty-two, Bob!"

"Well, s'pose you are? What about it?"

"Nothing, I guess," she replied with a half sigh. "Bob, do you ever get tired?"

"Of course I do. Don't you remember the nights I went to sleep eating supper. I was dog-tired then."

"But I mean tired of all this. Don't you want to get away some place and see something else?"

"Sure," I admitted. "I hate plowing and fencing and hoeing. I want to get away up North where there ain't nobody——"

"*Isn't any*body, Bob!"

"Yeh, all right—where there ain't anybody but an odd nitche, and see the big rivers and the hills and the glaciers; and I want to shoot a musk ox and some grizzlies, and hunt for gold. Tom Ballou and Louis know where it is—or anyway where it ought to be. I'm going, soon as I get old enough."

"But don't you want to see other things—cities, and people, and pictures, and theaters, and things, and hear real music?"

"Oh, I dunno," I replied. "I like music, but I

dunno about cities and crowds. I guess I'd get my elegant satisfy pretty quick. No shooting there. Nothing to see except houses and stores and trains. I'd get mighty tired of the same thing all the time. Up North you can keep on going. There's no end to the country, Tom says. If one place doesn't suit you you can pull out for another."

"And is that your ideal life, old boy—just to keep wandering in the North?"

"Well, I might like a change after a while," I admitted. "I'd like to go to Africa and hunt for ivory, like Gordon Cumming. And I'd like to see those Zulus. I guess they're bad."

She sighed, digging into the ground with a stick.

"We're different, Bobby boy. I suppose it's because we're of opposite sexes. And then I'm older. Anyway, I'm tired to death just at this moment of these woods and this river and of this little ranch—and of everything, but mostly of myself. Would you care to hear just what I'd like this afternoon?"

"Fire away," I said indulgently. She clasped her knees in her arms and stared at the river, as if it were the road to her desires, whatever they were.

"I'd like," she said, "just now, just at this minute, to be driving in a nice carriage of my own behind a team of big, shiny bays and a coachman

and footman in livery. I'd like to be dressed in the very latest fashion—whatever it is—and to call on other women and talk clothes, and dances, and gossip, and scandal, and whatever they *do* talk about; and drink tea out of dainty china, and nibble thin sandwiches and wafers and bonbons, and whatever they *do* nibble. And later I would be driven home to a house just as handsome as any I'd been in, which would be my own. And my maid would take my things and do every blessed thing for me, so that I needn't do a thing till it was time to dress for dinner. What do you think of it so far, Bobby?"

"Rotten!" I said candidly. "You've been reading some fool book. I'll bet I know the one. Nothing in it but a lot of love-mush. Punk! I quit it after the first chapter."

"Anyway that's what I'd like. And after dinner we should go to the theater."

"You and me?"

She did not correct me this time.

"Why, no, Bobby," she said slowly. "You aren't in this at all."

"Well, that suits me. But you said 'we.'"

"Did I? Well, I wasn't thinking of you, I'm afraid."

"Of who, then?" I asked, and once more I was not corrected.

"Why, Bobby," she said flushing a little, "I believe I must have meant my husband."

"Your *what?*" I cried. "Oh, you're crazy, Peg!"

"Am I not to have a husband, Bobby?"

"Some time, maybe," I conceded, "but you're only a girl yet."

"Well, this is only a daydream, and so I have one in it. If I hadn't a rich husband how could I have the carriage and the house and the maid and all the rest of it?"

"That's so," I admitted. "Might as well have a rich one. Go on."

"That's all. That winds up my dreamday. I'd be contented with one like that."

"Do you suppose you'll ever have it?"

"No, I don't suppose I ever shall. Not unless this old, brown river brings me a fairy prince. Don't tell uncle, Bobby. He must not suspect that I'm discontented. Nobody but you must know. I can trust my big brother always."

"Sure you can," I said. And she kissed me, which caress I am afraid I received with a somewhat bad grace. After that we fell silent, sitting side by side on the brown log, pursuing our several trains of thought. For my part I was engaged in plans for my hunt when Peggy exclaimed:

"Look, Bob, there's a canoe!"

I looked up. A canoe had rounded the bend and

was coming toward us. It held two men. The one in the stern was an Indian, a particularly worthless Cree whom we knew as Joe Fishbelly. The other man was white, and a stranger. He was not paddling, though a paddle rested athwart the canoe in front of him. He lay with his back against a roll of dunnage, and seemed satisfied to let the Indian do the work; which was, of course, quite proper for no doubt he was paying for it, but looked lazy. As he saw us he turned and spoke to the Cree, who swung the nose of the canoe in on our landing.

When they were close I could see that the white man was young and, though big of frame, very pale and thin, which was the more noticeable because he was naturally of a dark complexion. His head was bare, and his black hair clipped close to the scalp. His cheekbones seemed ready to start through the skin, and his cheeks were flat against his teeth, without any kindly padding. The angles of his jaw stood out prominently. Indeed his face, owing to his exceeding leanness, seemed all knobs and angles, and there were sad-colored hollows beneath his eyes. The eyes themselves put me in mind of some one's whom I knew, being full of a strange, whimsical, quizzical, quenchless deviltry, and yet steady and cool. And suddenly it came

to me that in expression they were like Dinny Pack's, though his were blue and these almost black.

The canoe slid alongside the landing, and its passenger straightened up from his recumbent position and bowed to Peggy.

"Good afternoon!" he said, smiling at us. The words were common enough, and yet there was something in his voice and manner which made us aware that he was not a man of the woods and rivers. "Can you tell me," he asked, "how far it is to Tom Ballou's? Man-afraid-of-a-paddle, back there"—and he nodded back over his shoulder at Fishbelly—"says it's about twenty miles, as nearly as I can understand him, and that we can't make it to-day."

"He's a liar," I said, for I held Fishbelly in contempt and did not care whether I hurt his feelings or not. "It's not more than five."

"I suspected something like that," said he. "Thank you. You hear that, my oxidized friend? I believe in my soul Ananias was a Cree!"

"They're not all like him. But there's nobody at Ballou's. They're away somewhere—gone prospecting, I think—and they won't be back for two or three weeks, and perhaps longer."

"The deuce they are!" he ejaculated ruefully, and rubbed his clipped scalp in comical perplexity. "I beg your pardon. But that puts me in a nice

fix. Here, I'll come ashore for a minute, if you don't mind." He did so rather slowly, as though his legs were weak beneath him, and bowed once more to Peggy. "Before I tell you my troubles," said he, "permit me to introduce myself. My name is Dunleath, first name James, usually shortened down to a non-apostolic 'Jim.' I am a friend of Mr. Wallace Dent Fothergill, whom I think you know. I presume I am addressing Miss Cory and her brother, am I not?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I'm Bob Cory, and this is my sister Peggy."

He bowed again, smiling, and Peggy smiled, and I laughed without knowing why; but just, I suppose, because of the big, radiant friendliness of his smile and his eyes.

"So now I'll unload my troubles," he went on. "I was going to spend a month or so with Ballou, just loafing and camping anywhere. The medical sharps thought that would set me up again. Of course you can see that I'm slightly pulled down. In fact I'm far from being a strong dog yet. Nothing infectious, I assure you. I'm no lunger—merely a pneumonia-typhoid convalescent. Fothergill told me about this country, and it looked good to me. But with Ballou away, things are complicated. Is there any one else I can get? Man-afraid-of-his-

paddle is barred for obvious reasons. I want a white man for guide, philosopher and friend."

"I'm afraid there isn't any one," I replied.

"Tough luck!" he said gloomily. "I guess I'll have to go back. I wouldn't spend a month with this Indian on a bet." Suddenly he brightened. "I wonder, now! Couldn't you arrange to come with me yourself? I'd make it worth your while, and I think we'd get along together all right."

"Oh, but Bob couldn't go!" Peggy exclaimed, putting in her oar unasked, as girls will.

"Why not?" I demanded. "The crop is all in. I'll ask uncle about it."

"Good—with due apologies to you, Miss Peggy," said Dunleath. "It's a case with me. If I can steal your brother I'll do it."

"Well, he's really worth stealing," she laughed. "But he's my chum, and I don't want to lose him. Here is uncle now. You'd better ask him."

Uncle Fred came limping down the trail, and I think he liked Mr. Dunleath, as we did. However, he would give him no answer as to me, but invited him to stay with us for a few days. An invitation which Mr. Dunleath accepted frankly, but with the proviso that he should live in his own tent so as not to incommode us. And so I helped him pitch his tent; and he got rid of Fishbelly, though the rascal overcharged him. And while he was settling

himself in his new quarters Peggy and I went back to our house together.

"Do you think uncle will let me go, Peg?" I asked wistfully.

"Do you really want to, Bobby?"

"You just bet I do!"

"Then I'll coax him."

"You're a dear old girl!" I said, giving her a hug which nearly lifted her from her feet, for I had never known her to coax in vain.

"You're getting stronger every day, boy," she said a little breathlessly. "Soon you *will* be my big brother. What do you think of Mr. Dunleath?"

"I like him. Don't you?"

"I don't know yet." She turned and looked back at the smooth flow of the Carcajou glowing with the westering sun. "How strange," she said half to herself, "that he should have come—just then—by the river!"

"What other way could he have come?" I asked. But she did not answer me, and went into the house singing softly to herself.

CHAPTER V

DEAD MEN'S BONES

FROM the first, there was no doubt that I should be allowed to go with Mr. Dunleath. But he was not strong, and Uncle Fred thought he should wait for a week at least. In that time I worked hard, so that I might go with a clear conscience. And meanwhile Uncle Fred and Peggy saw far more of our guest than I did. Indeed, he and Peggy became great friends, and spent hours together, reading and talking by the river; though for my part I could not see what he found to talk about to a girl so often and so long, and I told Peggy so.

"It's funny, isn't it?" she admitted humbly, but with a michievous twinkle in her eye. "But then he isn't well, Bob, and you must make allowance for that."

"I s'pose that's it," I conceded, and I wondered what she found to laugh at.

But Mr. Dunleath established himself firmly in our good graces. He could play the banjo in a way that made it seem another instrument altogether, and he had a stock of songs that we had

never heard of. So our evenings were gay, and Gus Swanson forgot his rheumatism in the swift patter of the ringing strings, and did clumsy shuffles like a bear.

"By Yiminy," he declared, "that faller play that banyo like Ole Bull play his fiddle!"

But I do not mean that Dunleath's singing and playing alone got him our regard. It was rather the fact that he never talked of himself, never obtruded his opinions if he had any, and was invariably courteous and considerate in little things; and in my opinion a man like that is a gentleman, whether he is red or white.

But I know I thought his convalescence most confoundedly slow. I imagine Peggy had as much to do with retarding it as anything or anybody. For the first time I was forced to the realization that an otherwise sane man may prefer mooning about with a girl to the attractions of the woods and the river. At any rate a fortnight elapsed before we made our start.

But one morning I routed him out of his blankets in the gray dawn, had his bed rolled and roped while he dressed, and loaded the canoe so that she trimmed to my liking, that is, well down in the stern and up in the bow, which is best under most circumstances. And I remember still the importance I felt when I picked up the steering paddle and

shoved off, waving it jauntily at Peggy and Uncle Fred on the bank; and yet with a certain preoccupied dignity, for was I not now a man and a guide?

I have no intention of describing the next three weeks in detail, because they contain little of interest. We went down the Carcajou by easy stages and into the Little Windy with its chain of lakes—where I managed to lose myself completely for several days, though my companion did not know it—and from there into the Antler. Of course much of this was strange country to me, but on the whole I got along very well by aid of a good memory and a sharp eye, for at different times I had had very accurate descriptions of it.

At first our stages were short, for my companion tired easily and was in no hurry. But after the first week his strength came back very fast—not having Peggy to warn him against the perils of overexertion, I suppose—and he delighted to test it. He was ignorant of many things which I supposed everybody knew, but he was quick to observe and asked questions continually. Being a boy I am afraid I was not above showing off a little. But if I could teach him things about a canoe and animals and fish and birds, and show him a lot of camping wrinkles, there were other things which he could teach me.

I had always considered myself a good swimmer until I saw him in the water, and then I knew myself for a mere flapper, and immediately set about acquiring the strokes he employed so smoothly. Then, too, I discovered that he was "scienced" as we called it, meaning that he could box and wrestle. I was eager to be taught, and I think he enjoyed teaching me; but of course as we had no gloves we were a little handicapped in the boxing lessons, though we made rough pillows out of a flour sack and moss. But when it came to wrestling, though I was a strong, active youngster, he handled me as if I had been a baby, and I knew that when he had his full strength he would be a formidable opponent for any man, even my old hero, Dinny Pack. And thinking of that one day, I told him of how Dinny had trimmed Nootka Charlie to a peak down by our landing.

"Good for Dinny," he approved. "I'd like to shake hands with him."

"I wonder if you could lick him?" I speculated.

"Do you?" he said with a grin. "Well, my son, you'll never know, because you couldn't hire me to try."

"But you have had fights, haven't you?"

"None that I could dodge. Because a fellow can use his fists and body a little, it doesn't follow that he's a fighter. The scrappiest sports I ever ran

across were the fellows who couldn't fight a little bit. Mind you, the only man who gets any fun out of a fight is the man who isn't in it. No matter if you can fight or not, always back out of a scrap if you can, dodge it, do all you can to avoid it until you see clearly that it can't be done. Then it's good policy to start it yourself, fast and hard."

With mutual instruction to interest us we got along very well indeed, and became fast friends. And so day after day we wandered down the water byways, without hurry, meeting nobody, as entirely alone as if we had been first travelers in the land.

We portaged over from the Antler into the Cuisse Lakes, and one day on the Upper Cuisse we landed to boil the tea pail and eat a lunch of cold venison and bannock. As we rested afterward, my eye caught the glint of some white objects on the sand dunes a hundred yards or so away, and I walked over to examine them. They were bones, sticking out of the sand, but they were not scattered; they were in regular order, as if the animal to which they belonged lay below with its bony framework entire.

"What do you suppose it was?" I asked Jim Dunleath.

"By George," he said, "those are human ribs. It's a skeleton."

"Let's dig him up!" I suggested.

"I see plainly," he said with a grin, "that you are destined for the medical profession. You have all the earmarks of a freshman med. All right, my resurrectionist friend, go to it."

And so I fetched a broken shovel that we carried to shift coals on the bake kettle, and dug away. In a few minutes I had the gruesome thing bare. It had disarticulated long ago, and fell to pieces when the supporting sands were removed. The skull was whole and the teeth still in their sockets. Evidently it was the skeleton of a big, able-bodied man. For some moments we stood in silence, looking down on all that was left of one who had dropped out from the long trail to tread a longer one.

"'Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him well,'" said Jim Dunleath.

"You did?" I cried in astonishment. "How can you tell, just from the bones? Yorick? Was he a Swede?"

"A Dane, I think. No, this isn't Yorick. I was just repeating a line from a play."

Which was just like Jim Dunleath. Most men would have told me it was one of the best-known quotations, and made me feel ashamed of my

ignorance, for at that time I had read no Shakespeare; but not Dunleath.

"Oh, a play," I said. "Well, I wonder who this fellow was."

"Some Indian, I suppose," he returned. "Poor devil! No way of—hallo! What's this?"

He stooped and picked from the bottom of the excavation a small, metal box, blackened and discolored. In shape it looked like a little curling stone, and it was about four inches across and perhaps two inches deep.

"Why," I said, "that's an old tobacco box. The old-timers used 'em. Most of 'em were silver, and they were just about water-tight. You don't see so many of 'em now."

"You talk like an old-timer yourself." He scratched the box with his knife-point. The scratch was bright. "This *is* silver," he decided, "otherwise it would have rusted to nothing, I should think. Must have lain there a long time."

He tried to open it, but the lid, which fitted very closely, refused to move. After repeated trials he discovered that, instead of lifting, it swung.

"I wonder what brand he smoked?" he said as it came back.

But there was no tobacco. The interior was filled with a paper, folded so that it fitted neatly.

This he pressed out carefully. Beneath it was an odd-looking scrap of dried, parchmentlike skin, about the size of a silver dollar, to which wisps of straight, black hair still clung.

"What in thunder is this?" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps the paper will tell," I suggested.

"Right, my son. I see I was mistaken. You will some day be a great detective." He unfolded the paper carefully. "Writing, sure enough!" he exclaimed. "Must have been a white man. Pencil writing, and pretty bad. Let's see if we can read it!"

He smoothed it out flat on the sand and we lay down on our stomachs to decipher it. The paper had apparently been old and crumpled before being written on. In addition the writing was clumsy, faint and shaky. In parts it was quite illegible, but this is what we finally made out:

DEAR BROTHER: I am writing this on the divide north of Shagenaw, because I am too sick to travel any more, and I guess this is my finish, for the pain hits me worse every time. (Here several lines were quite undecipherable.) . . . to stand us off and six men were killed . . . Black Donald myself, not knowing who he was, and lucky for him for if I had got him alive he would have died slow . . . went back on the bargain and wanted equal shares all around, and I had to pretend to agree because they were too many to stand off alone. But it turned out . . .

away fast enough and we found there was a big bunch after us and headed us into . . . traveling faster than we could the way we . . . cache everything and scatter and meet again when it was safe and they agreed because it was that or get caught.

I took Joe Barbe with me and left the rest, and we doubled back and watched the bunch go by. And then we raised the cache and made a new one. That is what I want to tell you about because you know old Joe isn't all there at times since that time on the Slave, and in case he forgets here is how you will find it:

The cache is on the Burntwood Lakes, on the one the Indians call Ahtikamag, on a creek on the west side of it near the upper end. It is in a rock cave. We blocked up the mouth with rocks and loosened down a little slide to make a good job, and there was a bigger slide than we thought, so it is blocked good and plenty. You will have to dig your way in, and be careful not to shake down more. The cave is dry and cold, so everything will be O. K.

I was afraid to blaze a tree or set up anything because they will comb the country fine. But for landmarks there is a big hawks' nest right opposite the cache on the far side of the creek, and downhill from the tree is a red rock with a flat top, and on that I marked a line. Lay your rifle along the line and she will sight for the mouth of the cache.

Now these dogs went back on their bargain and I have fooled them plenty. Don't tell them you know or give them a share. Let them hunt for the cache till they give up. Then get about four big canoes and men you can trust and go after it yourself . . . saw better nor anything like them in my life, and no one else. You would

hardly believe . . . worth a hun . . . to see you again but I guess I am out of luck so good-by.

Your loving brother

ANGUS MCNAB.

P. S. I am putting in a lock of Black Donald's hair because you hated him about like I did. I told him I would get him before I died and I am glad I did. Use this box and think of me once in a while. Use old Joe right because he stayed with me.

When we had finished reading this remarkable message from the past—and it was not at all easy to read—Jim Dunleath looked at me with lifted brows.

"Well, my son," said he, "what have we struck? Who on earth is—or was—Angus McNab?"

"I never heard of him."

"He must have been a mighty hard-bitten sport," he said and lifted the scrap of skin and black hair gingerly. "By thunder! Bob, this belonged to some gentleman called 'Black Donald,' and Angus McNab scalped him!"

I nodded, my eyes bulging at the grisly memento of by-gone feud and hate.

"But what is the letter about, anyway?" he went on. "It's disjointed—written by a sick man—and he rambles. Now let's see: McNab and some tough bunch, of which he seems to have been the leader, fought for something valuable and won out.

They quarreled over the spoils. About then, they had to make a get-away from some party that outnumbered them. So they cached whatever it was, and McNab lifted it and cached it again. It was bulky, or heavy, because they couldn't travel with it, and anyway that part about the canoes settles it. Then, having fooled his companions, McNab took sick and wrote this note to his brother and gave it to Joe Barbe. If Barbe is this skeleton—or the skeleton Barbe—his brother never saw it. And that is likely from the way we found the letter in the box. So the chances are that whatever they cached is there still."

"But what was it?" I asked. "Gold?"

"Not likely. He tells his brother to bring about four canoes. He couldn't have four canoe loads of gold. He says it is worth 'a hun——' That must mean a hundred. A hundred what?"

"A hundred dollars!" I suggested foolishly.

"Pshaw! Nobody would bother caching a hundred dollars. A hundred wouldn't weigh anything. He must mean a hundred thousand at the least."

"Gosh!" I breathed. "That's a whole bunch of money."

"Think so, Bob?" he said dryly. "Well, it is—when you haven't got it. Not so much when you have. I know a fellow who got rid of that much in a couple of years."

"He must have been a darn fool," I said candidly.

"So he was. And as the Wise Men of the East remarked: 'A fool and his father's money are soon parted.' Well—where are these Burntwood Lakes the letter speaks of?"

"It's up North. Up the Brule River, I think. I don't know just where. I guess Tom Ballou would know."

"Well," he said, "when we get back we'll ask him about it. And now let's cover up the bones of old Joe Barbe, and put up a cairn or a cross or something just as a mark of respect from humans to an ex-human. And then let's get out of here. I don't think I want to camp on this lake to-night."

CHAPTER VI

THE FACTOR'S STORY

WHEN, a week after, we sighted Ballou's cabin there was smoke coming from the chimney. It was noon, and we were bucking a stiff head wind as well as current, and I for one was both tired and hungry.

"Let's stop and eat with them," I suggested.

"Good enough," Dunleath agreed. "I've got Fothergill's letter in my war bags somewhere. And we can ask Ballou about this McNab. But I won't tell him we've found anything. We're after information, not out to give it."

"Sure," I said. "I won't say a word."

As it turned out, old Hayes was at the cabin, too, and as much at home as any of them. But he and Louis did not seem on very good terms, I suppose because they had seen too much of each other. Tom Ballou read Mr. Fothergill's letter of introduction and looked Jim Dunleath up and down.

"Sorry we was away," he said, "but you look as if Bob had treated you all right."

"He certainly did. I don't look like a sick man now, do I?"

"No more'n I do."

"Well," Dunleigh laughed, eying the lean old frontiersman, "if I look as healthy as you do I guess I'm over the hump. The cold fact is that for the last week I've had all I could do to keep from eating Bob alive. I have an appetite like a wolf."

"We'll fix that. Louis is rustling grub right now."

"Did you have any luck?" I asked.

"Same old thing—colors and float. One bar might pay a Chinaman to work."

"I told you we took the wrong fork o' that crick," Hayes put in. "I told you when we was——"

"Ah pour l'amour du bon Dieu, shut up your face on dat!" Louis interrupted in a swift flare of exasperation, as if the other had been harping too long on one string. "By Kris, I ain't been hear not'ing but about dat since t'ree week! If you know so moch why don't you pass yourself on dat odder fork when we come to her? For why don't you go prospec' by your lonely, hey?"

"I sure will next time," drawled old Hayes. "When I'm by my lone I can keep clean. But campin' with a Frenchman——"

"Ol'-timer," said Louis, "you want to go slow, or some day for sure I twis' your dam ol' neck so you spit on your heel!"

"Quit that and sweeten up your stomachs with some sody," Ballou put in.

"Pshaw! I was only foolin' with him," said old Hayes. "Louis can take a joke, can't you, Louis?"

"I tak' a joke the way you mak' her," Louis replied enigmatically, and began to prepare dinner while Ballou and Dunleath talked.

"Did you ever hear of a man named McNab?" the latter asked a few minutes later.

Louis was frying pork which was sputtering great blisters of fat; and as Dunleigh spoke, he jumped as if he had been stung, and swore and wrung his hand.

"Mo Gee!" he ejaculated, "dat pork gr-ris she's burn comme le diable!"

Old Hayes was lighting his pipe, and he held the burning match several inches from the bowl, while from force of habit he sucked vigorously at the cold tobacco, his lean old cheeks working like a bellows. Then the flame nipped his fingers and he, too, swore. But Ballou asked:

"McNab? There's lots of McNabs. What one do you mean?"

"This one would be an old-timer. I think his first name was Angus."

"How did you hear of him yourself?"

"I think somebody mentioned the name when I was coming in. Or else I saw it somewhere.

Somehow I got the idea that he was a rather hard citizen."

"Lots of old-timers were hard citizens."

"And that's no lie," Hayes put in. "Did you ever hear of this Angus McNab, Tom?"

Ballou reflected, with narrowed eyes.

"No, I don't think so. I knew an Archie McNab in Cariboo, and there was a Duncan McNab down in the Bitterroot once. That's all I remember. They wouldn't be the ones. I never heard of Angus McNab, did you, Louis?"

"Nevaire!" Louis replied emphatically above his pork.

Old Hayes, it appeared, did not know him either. It was a disappointment. I had made sure that one of them would have heard of McNab if he had been at all celebrated. We had dinner and went down to the canoe.

"You headin' for the outside now?" Ballou asked.

"Not immediately. I'm here for my health, and I may stay a month. If Bob's folks get tired of me I may ask you to let me camp around here somewhere."

"No chance of our getting tired," I said.

"If they do," said Ballou, "you know where to come. Come anyhow. We ain't got much, but you're welcome."

A couple of hours afterward we reached home,

and Peggy hugged me as if I had been away a year. We set up Dunleath's tent again on the old spot, and I resumed my daily tasks, which after my taste of freedom were more distasteful than ever. And Peggy and Dunleath resumed their long talks and walks. Even I could see that they did not want company, and so I let them severely alone.

Uncle Fred could tell us nothing about Angus McNab, though the name seemed vaguely familiar, and I had given up hope of learning more, when one night old McClintock, the factor at Carcajou House, traveling back from Neepaw by canoe, stopped with us overnight as was his custom, for he and my uncle were great friends.

"Angus McNab!" he exclaimed when he heard the name. "Did ever I hear of him? Aye, that I did. Ye'll be meanin' 'Nitche' McNab, Mr. Dunleath."

"I don't know," said Jim Dunleath. "Who was Nitche McNab?"

"He was a deevil," McClintock replied. "A dour, thievin', bluidy-minded deevil!"

"A half-breed?"

"Weel, I'll na' go that far. Maybe an eighth. Ye'll understan' that man—and mair especially a Scotchman—wasna made to live alone, and in the early days, white weemin were scarce. But on the male side he was Hielan' blood, and he was born

in the Selkirk settlements of white parents. 'Nitche' was just a nickname, because he had Indian habits —bad ones at that. Also he was dark of skin—a swart deevil. But his brother was red as a fox."

"He had a brother, had he?"

"A younger brother, Alec, little better than himsel', but with less brain. Bluidy murderers, the pair o' them. First an' last they cost the company a fortune."

"But what did they do?"

"Suffeecient!" McClintock replied grimly, lighting the clay pipe that was his inseparable companion. "Ye'll be wantin' the yarn? Weel, it was this way: In the beginning Nitche was in the service of the company, and he rose to a small post on the Churchill. There he robbed the company with both hands, trading on his own account and stealing the best skins, and his brother helped him at it. Ye'll understan' that in those days—that'll be upwards of twenty years ago—the company made its own laws and enforced them. When Nitche's thievin's were discovered he tried to get away. Inside fifty miles he was caught and brought back to be tried. He was flogged before all the Indians and the men of the post, and turned loose to leave the country—if he could."

"Well, couldn't he?"

"The company," McClintock replied, "wasna stakin' him to gun, canoe, or food."

"Great Scott!" Dunleath exclaimed as the full meaning of this dawned on him.

"It wasna intended as a humane measure, but as an example," said McClintock grimly. "In dealin' with Indians ye'll understan' humanity is a mistake. The company was forced to punish its own men caught in wrongdoin' in the same way. But Nitche McNab was long-headed as weel as bluidy-minded. Against preceesely sic an eventuality he had cached a gun and food. A week afterward the man who laid the lash on him was found stabbed to death in his blankets. And two days after that, Donald Murdoch who had ordered the floggin' was shot from the dark as he sat in his chair."

"Donald Murdoch?"

"Aye, Black Donald Murdoch. A hard man. He was just wounded and got over it. But na doubt Nitche thought he had killed him, for he seemed to vanish from the country. No one heard of him for a year or two. Then it was discovered that he was tradin' with the Indians across the divide on the Athabaska. Six men were sent to take him and his brother, and but one came back. The Indians say the brothers killed them, one at a time, from ambush. Then they disappeared, as they had before."

McClintock paused, refilled his clay, and relighted it deliberately.

"The rest," he continued, "is but little known, and at the time the company had its own reasons for silence. But at this date I'm violatin' no confidence when I tell ye. Nitche McNab, ye'll understand, knew the country, an' the posts, an' the customs of the company. And so he got together a small band of desperate characters like himself—maybe a dozen or more in all—to raid certain of the company's posts when the winter's catch of furs was in and before the brigades came to take them out."

"By George!" Jim Dunleath exclaimed, and suddenly a great light broke on me. Furs! That was what it was. That was what the cache of Nitche McNab held.

"Ye may weel say that," McClintock nodded. "Sic an enterprise was never undertaken before or since, to my knowledge. There are reasons why I shouldna tell ye the names of the posts. But they came in at the heel of the winter, overland, and held up one post after another, looted them of their best furs and went on to the next. As luck would have it, that winter's catch of furs was far above the ordinary in quantity and quality. It was a good year—the best I remember. They took a fortune in skins from those posts, as prices

went then. At present-day values the total would be something ye'd scarce credit.

"Now, at the last post they raided was that same factor, Black Donald Murdoch, that Nitche had shot on the Churchill. Nitche may have known that or he may not. They took the post, but they had to fight hard. In the fighting, men were killed on either side, and among them was Murdoch. Nitche McNab—the damned savage!—scalped him."

"He must have been a good hater," Dunleath commented.

"Aye, I grant him that—an' it's na so bad a point," McClintock admitted grudgingly. "Weel, then, having taken this last post they tried to get away with their plunder. But the men of the looted posts had combined and were after them. And that year because of an early spring the brigades came in earlier than usual. So that though the robbers had smashed all the canoes they could find except what they took for themselves, they found a force on their trail which was too large for them to fight. They were headed, and had to turn north up the Reindeer and the Brule, and, heavily loaded with plunder as they were, they could not travel fast enough to escape."

"Do you mean they were captured?" Dunleath asked anxiously.

"I didna say that, young man. What I have

told ye so far is fact. The rest is supposeetion and rumor. It is said that Nitche and his men quarreled. When they found themselves hard pressed, Nitche was for makin' one cache of the plunder, and the others wished to divide it, break up the party, and each take his chance. In the end Nitche had his way. They cached the furs and broke up, some overland and some by canoe, so that it was like lookin' for needles in a haystack. Of the lot, only two men were caught, and the tale of these is what I have told you."

"But did they tell where the cache was?"

"Oh, aye, they told where it *was*. I'll no say they volunteered the information, but they yielded to persuasion. But the cache had been lifted. There was not so much as a rat skin left. And from that day to this the company has never seen or heard of its stolen furs."

"What is the theory?" Dunleath asked.

"Naturally that some of the thieves doubled back and lifted it. Still, the company could never find that these skins had been offered for sale. Very strange, that. But the result is the same so far as the company is concerned."

"And what became of Nitche McNab."

"Nobody knows. Pairsonally, I have little doubt that it was Nitche lifted the cache. He was like a fox for cunning, and he would know that if any

of his men were captured the secret would not be safe. And, as I say, they had quarreled. He would not trust them. Takin' one thing with another it seems likely that having lifted the cache he perished by some mischance, and the secret of the furs with him."

"So that the furs are still where he cached them?"

"Aye, pro-bably."

"Would they be worth anything now?"

"That'll depen'. Furs will keep indefinitely if dry and free from insects. It's like he would cache them well."

"And you say they were very valuable."

"Accordin' to the men who bought them and the company's books. It was a rare year. The pack was like that of a hundred years gone, when the country was new. There were many black fox, and marten big and black as tomcats, and even sea otter traded in somehow from the far coast Indians. Oh, aye, it was a verra serious loss to the company." And old McClintock shook his head sadly.

That night I dreamed of furs. In the morning when McClintock had gone, sitting in state in his big canoe with its six paddles, and the smoke from his clay pipe floating out astern like a steamer's, Jim Dunleath turned to Uncle Fred.

"I'm going after those furs," he said, "and I want Bob. Half of what we find belongs to him, of course. Can you spare him for the rest of the summer?"

"I guess so," my uncle replied. "But it's a long way to those lakes, and he can't guide you. You'd never get there yourselves. And if you did, and found the furs, you couldn't bring out more than a fraction of them."

"I know that," Dunleath replied. "I'm going to get a proper outfit of men and canoes. The deuce of it is"—he hesitated for a moment—"well, the cold fact is, I haven't got the money."

"Neither have I," said my uncle bluntly, "if that is what you mean."

"No, I didn't mean that. I can get the money, but it will take a little time. I'll have to go to Neepaw and wire, and I want to start to-morrow."

"Well," said my uncle with a twinkle in his eye, "if you can coax Bob away from his work on the ranch he may go with you."

CHAPTER VII

PREPARATIONS

NEEPAW is now a busy, thriving town, almost a city, with waterworks, electric lights, banks, a theater and all the rest of it. But at that time it was merely a trading point, an outpost of civilization whence a single sagging wire trailed away southward, a tenuous filament, often broken, connecting it with the outer world of men and events.

"You see, Bob," Dunleath explained, "I'll have to get money from Fothergill for this trip. If I could see him, there would be no trouble. As it is, I'll have to put it up to him that it's a gamble. But that ought to appeal to him. It always did."

"Is he a gambler?" I asked in surprise.

"No, he's in the wholesale drygoods business—nominally. That is, his father made the business and about half a million and left both to Fothergill. Fothergill lets other people run it, and has a good time. Not that he isn't a good business man. He is. But what I meant was that he's game to take a long chance. And this is a mighty long one."

"But I thought," I said hesitatingly, "that you had plenty of money. I guess you paid me too much. I wish you'd take some of it back."

He laughed gently and shook his head. "Not a nickel, old boy, though it's good of you. Just between ourselves I had some money once and I lost it. The next lot I get I'm going to hang on to. I have some stocks, but they are down to rock bottom now, and if I let go I'd lose. So I'll get it from Fothergill."

But for two days he got no reply to his telegram, and we waited impatiently. When at last the answer came he puckered his mouth and whistled.

"Can't you get it?" I asked anxiously.

"That part is all right. Fothergill wants to come with us, though of course I didn't tell him what we were going for. He knows there's something up and he wants to be in the fun. Well, as he's putting up the money he's entitled to a run for it. I always understood that he had a good deal of experience in roughing it."

Remembering what Louis Beef had said as to Mr. Fothergill's ability to lose himself, I repeated his words. Dunleath laughed.

"As a matter of fact I always suspected that he wasn't the original Leatherstocking. But he's a good fellow, Bob, one of the best in the world, and it's white of him to help us out. We'll have to wait for him."

So we waited, and I found the time pass very slowly. At last he arrived, not on the stage but

in a wagon which he had hired; and it was piled with a quantity of rolls and bundles of dunnage which quite appalled me.

Wallace Dent Fothergill was a big man, beefy, red-faced, with a loud voice and a bluff offhand manner. He was wearing a four-punch hat, a fringed buckskin shirt and moccasins, and he had a belt full of cartridges around his extensive middle. I suppose he thought these things made him look like an old-timer; whereas they merely advertised him as a pilgrim. And the driver grinned at us as his passenger climbed down.

"Klahowya, Jim!" Fothergill shouted to Dunleath. He pronounced it "klahow-ya," which is quite wrong, for the Chinook greeting is accented sharply on the second syllable which is "ho." "Klahowya, Jim! Hope you're feeling hiyu skookum again. And Bob Cory, too. Lord, Bob, you've grown! I didn't kumtux you at first. And how is the uncle and the pretty sister and everybody at your illahee?"

He had a fashion of interlarding his conversation with Chinook words which he did not always use correctly, apart from the pronunciation, though in this case he was all right. Just in fun I asked him in Chinook what made him so large around the waist. He didn't understand a word of it. But all the same he made a bluff in English, thanking me for inquiring. And the driver snickered

again, and Jim Dunleath gave me a reproving glance, though of course he did not understand what I had said either.

"And now, Jim," said Mr. Fothergill after dinner when he had lit a huge cigar, "I'm ready to hear all about it."

So Dunleath showed him the old letter of Nitche McNab and told him what we had heard from McClintock.

"And that," he concluded, "is what we have to go on. Not being blessed with the ready cash to finance an expedition to look for this old cache, I wired you. Now you know as much about it as I do. If you don't feel like staying with the game, say so. I admit it's a long shot."

"Well, I'm lucky with these long ones," said Mr. Fothergill. "Of course I'll stay with it. About twenty years ago, this was. That ought to pretty nearly extinguish any title the company had to the furs. Anyway, if we find 'em we can make practically our own salvage terms."

"So I think. Bob and I have equal shares in this. Now you come in and we'll split the profits—if there are any—three ways. Will that be satisfactory to you?"

"Say," said Mr. Fothergill, "do you think my name is Shylock? I've got all the money I want.

This is fun for me. If we get the furs you can repay what I spend—and that's all."

But Jim Dunleath would not have it that way, telling him rather stiffly that we were neither of us objects of charity. Mr. Fothergill called him a crank. They got quite hot about it. But finally Mr. Fothergill agreed to take a quarter interest.

"Meet me, now," he said. "Don't be so blame proud."

And so we all shook hands on it; and seeing how really generous and good-hearted he was I resolved not to make fun of him any more, no matter what he did or said.

"Ballou will guide us, of course," he announced, "and Louis will cook. I'm surprised that you haven't engaged them already. However, you just leave it to Tom and me. We'll pick out good men. We'll need eight or ten. The expense is a detail. We'll do this thing right. Tom will know where to get good men. When I've told him where we're going and what we're after——"

"Hold on, Wally," said Dunleath. "That's just what you must not do."

"Why not?" Mr. Fothergill demanded.

"Because, Wally, though competition may be the life of trade it's poor from the standpoint of monopolists. We are monopolists—so far as in-

formation of this cache is concerned. I don't want anybody told where we are going or why."

"But old Tom is as honest as the sun and as close as a clam."

"That's the way he struck me. But all the same I want this kept among us three until we get on the ground."

"But, hang it!" Mr. Fothergill exclaimed impatiently. "We've got to give some reason for going into that country with such an outfit. Why not be frank with Ballou? It's far the best policy."

"Now look here," said Dunleath emphatically, "I'm not going to take a single chance on this, Wally, and that goes. I want to have those furs in possession before the company gets wind of them. Then we can make our own terms. If somebody leaked we might have a rival outfit on the ground, and there might be all kinds of trouble."

"Something in that, perhaps," Mr. Fothergill admitted. "All right. I'll think up some plausible yarn. And we'll put ourselves in Tom's hands as to men. You can bet that any man he recommends will be good. And without egotism, I think I know these backwoodsmen pretty well. Any man that gets past Tom and me will be all right. Don't you worry. I'll look after our organization myself."

That, as I learned later, was a characteristic of Mr. Fothergill. He was prone, unasked, to take

things into his own hands, and I think it was knowledge of this trait which had made Dunleath doubtful when he had received the telegram.

It was evident that we should never get Mr. Fothergill and his dunnage into a small canoe. And then he bought a quantity of supplies and tools. I solved the problem by getting a big canoe and two Indians to paddle it. They were Ojibways, named Billy Finger and Jake Horsefly, both good men. And so Mr. Fothergill rode in comfort, and was able to shift about and stretch his limbs; and when I saw how he did it, I was very glad he was not in the little canoe with me. Because, as every one knows or ought to know, though you may do almost anything you like in a canoe so long as your motions and weight follow the fore-and-aft line of its center, when you depart from that line you take chances. Mr. Fothergill hitched and lurched in a way that would have upset a sixteen-foot canoe a dozen times in a mile, and I could imagine the trouble he had been to Ballou and Louis.

Dunleath and I stopped at the ranch when we reached it, while Fothergill and the Indians went through to Ballou's.

I had bought a few simple presents for Peggy and Uncle Fred; but Jim Dunleath had things for them which quite put mine in the shade—books, and music, and almost a half bushel of candy for

Peg; and for my uncle a case of pipes and half a dozen boxes of cigars. And for me, quite without my knowledge, he had a long forty-one caliber Colt's single action six-shooter, blued, plain and businesslike, a weapon which I had often longed for.

Most of these things were not to be had in Neepaw, and he must have telegraphed for them. Altogether they must have cost him a pretty penny, and I don't think my uncle quite approved.

"I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth," he said, "but for a young man that's broke, you are getting pretty strong."

"I'm not broke," Jim Dunleath laughed. "I have a fortune in furs."

"And a castle in Spain," said my uncle dryly.

"Yes—more than one," he replied, laughing; and as he said it his eyes sought Peggy's, and I thought she blushed a little, though I could not see what his Spanish property had to do with her. You see I had never heard the phrase before and took it literally, though I soon found out it was a mere figure of speech.

In the morning Mr. Fothergill came up the river with the Indians, and he was jubilant.

"I've made all arrangements," he said. "I knew we could depend on old Tom. He will go, and Louis, and his old tillikum, Hayes. A fine old

fellow, Hayes; a genuine frontiersman, one of a vanishing type."

"Personally," said Dunleath, "I don't care how soon his type vanishes. He seems to me to be a pretty hard old bird."

"Of course he's hard. A rough diamond, like all those fellows. They had to be hard to survive. It ill becomes us, who ride in comfort on the trails they blazed, to sneer at them."

"Well," said Dunleath, "I don't know what trails Hayes has blazed, but I'll bet a fair proportion of them lead to saloons. However, that's so of too many of us. Hayes goes. How about other men?"

"Tom's off to Scott's Portage to get them. He thinks he can find three or four there."

"What's the matter with these Indians? They are good men."

"I mentioned that to Tom; but he pointed out that it would be better to have all white men. He isn't prejudiced against Indians himself, but some are—Hayes for one. Others might be."

"Any one who can stand Hayes ought to be able to stand an Indian," said Dunleath. "Is Hayes running this show, or are we?"

"You've taken an unreasonable dislike to that old pioneer," said Mr. Fothergill. "Why, you've only seen him once or twice. He may have his peculiarities, but he's a friend of Tom's, and that's good

enough for me. You'll like him when you know him better."

"Maybe. But I hate to discard two perfectly good Indians on his say-so. Well, all right, if you want it that way. Did Ballou ask any questions?"

"Naturally he wanted to know why we required such a big outfit. He thought the three of them and the three of us would be plenty for anything."

"Well?"

"Well, I just told him to get four more men, and that we would take four big canoes and one small one; and when he asked what we were going to do with the big canoes I said we expected to bring them back loaded with natural products of the country."

Jim Dunleath laughed. "Was he satisfied with that?"

"Not altogether. He asked a few questions. I had to say something, so I told him we had information of some valuable deposits. No harm in that, was there?"

"No, I guess not. Only my limited experience has been that a good, straightforward lie is the most honest form of evasion."

"Well, hang it, I wouldn't tell old Tom a flat-footed lie that I'd have to acknowledge later. It would be tantamount to a suspicion of his honesty.

I tell you these old-timers are as frank and simple and straightforward as the sun. I know them, and you don't."

Mr. Fothergill was plainly put out, and Dunleath let the matter drop. There was nothing to do but wait for Ballou's return. Fothergill took up his quarters with Louis and Hayes. I worked hard about the ranch. And Peggy and Jim Dunleath spent more and more time together.

Ballou was away a week. He returned with three big canoes, which, with the one we had brought from Neepaw, made up our complement, and four recruits, strangers to me. All were young men, and though they were evidently strong and experienced canoemen I didn't care much for their looks.

Hector McGregor seemed to be the leader. He stood six feet in his moccasins and he was beautifully built. He was red of hair, high of cheekbone as an Indian, with a straight, wide mouth and a pair of insolent blue eyes. His tongue carried the Highland burr of his ancestors, and it was easy to see that he had a hair-trigger temper. Jordan and Conover were of a more ordinary type, such as may be seen by the score anywhere in the North among the lumberjacks and rivermen. The fourth man was a breed, Peter Opegagun, and his appearance was decidedly against him. He was well-

built enough, but his mouth bent down at the corners like the curve of a hawk's bill, his nose had been broken and sat sidewise in his wide, flat face, his upper lip was thinly thatched with coarse hair, his ears projected outward and his head narrowed in above them, and he had the smallest, lowest forehead I have ever seen in a man. Nevertheless he seemed to be on good terms with the others.

"And now," said Mr. Fothergill, "we are organized, thanks to old Tom. I told you it was best to leave it to him. I have been talking to these fellows, and they are right on the job. I don't suppose it would be possible to find a better lot. Real voyageurs, of the old type. Ready to go anywhere and do anything."

"That half-breed," said Dunleath, "certainly looks as if he'd do anything—murder for choice."

"I never knew such a darned kicker as you are, Jim," said Mr. Fothergill testily. "You tenderfeet are all alike. You expect every man to look like the hero of an alleged Western drama."

"Well," Dunleath returned, "I confess that I don't except Gustave Doré models."

"'Handsome is as handsome does,'" Mr. Fothergill quoted in a very superior way.

"What I admire about you, Wally," Jim Dunleath retorted, "is your originality. You get off such

neat things on the spur of the moment. Would you mind repeating that? It's too good to be lost."

Mr. Fothergill, redder than usual, told him to go to the devil. I thought for a moment they were going to quarrel, for one word usually leads to two, but it blew over. However, it was not a good start for men who would be forced to spend a month or two together.

The evening before our departure was close and muggy. I was busy overhauling my outfit, and when I was through I went outside to look for Peg. But she was not around anywhere, and neither was Jim Dunleath. By that time I knew better than to go looking for them, for I had done that once or twice before and when I had found them it was clear that I was about as popular as a crow with two kingbirds. And so I sat down on the grass in the shadow of a bushy soft maple, where I presently fell asleep. I came out of my slumber with the sound of voices near by, and there were the two of them close to me in the starlight. But they were so much occupied with each other that they did not see me at all.

"I'll bid your uncle good-by in the morning," Jim Dunleath was saying, "but I'd rather say good-by to you now—alone."

"Good-by," said Peggy softly, "and good luck! I shall think of you—and Bob—very often."

"Thank goodness it's only for a few weeks. Do you know that I shall find that time very long?"

"Really?" said Peggy in a very small voice.

"Really and truly. Each night, at dusk, I shall wish that I were here with you, beside this old, brown river. I believe I shall pretend that I am."

"It would be fun, wouldn't it. Mental telepathy. Is that it?"

"Well, I hope it works. If we find those furs——" He broke off.

"You were going to say——" Peggy reminded him, after a pause.

"I was going to say something which I had better keep till then," he replied. And so he said good night and good-by, standing very close to her, looking down into her face and holding her hands, and went away. And she watched him vanish in the gloom, her slight figure drooping a little as a flower that craves the rain.

"Peg!" I said.

She started with a little cry.

"Bob! Is that you? What are you doing there?"

"Nothing. I was asleep. You woke me up." I shivered a little, for the night chill had crept up from the river.

"You had no business to be asleep there. You frightened me."

"I didn't mean to. What do you suppose he was going to say?"

"You were listening!" she cried.

"I wasn't!" I denied indignantly. "I just couldn't help hearing."

"Yes, you could! You could have spoken. It was sneaky of you!"

"Aw, go on!" I retorted. "If you and Jim Dunleath want to spoon without being heard why don't you go somewhere else?"

"We don't!" she exclaimed angrily. "You—you're mean, Bob. You lie there like a—a snake, and frighten me, and listen to what's none of your business, and ask impertinent questions. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Rats!" I told her with brotherly frankness. "You make me tired. I don't care a darn what you were talking about. Mush, that's what it was. Going to pretend you are together by the river every night. Kid's tricks! You're the one that ought to be ashamed. I'll tell him so, too."

"If you do," she flamed, "I'll never speak to you again—never. Remember, Bob!"

"Oh well, I won't then," I promised. "No need to get hot about it. Why didn't he propose to you, Peg? Any one can see you're stuck on him."

And the next instant my ear rang to the impact of her clenched fist against it, and I staggered,

for she was strong for a girl, and I was taken utterly by surprise. I caught her wrists, and she wrenched against my grip. Even in the starlight I could see that her eyes were blazing with anger, and her face white.

"You brute! You big-boy brute!" she panted. "Let me go. Oh, how dare you? How could you?" And suddenly she stopped struggling and began to cry softly. Whereat, panic-stricken, I put my arm around her and walked her out of earshot of the house.

"There now, old girl, don't be a darn fool," I said in what I considered a highly comforting manner. "What's the row? What did you punch me for? I didn't mean anything."

"Oh, Bob," she sobbed, "it was brutal of you. And yet it must be my own fault. Oh, do you suppose I have let him see—and of course you don't know how a thing like that cuts a girl, when he—I mean she—oh, I can't talk about it, even to you!"

Which was all Greek to me. But finally she stopped crying and dried her eyes and gave me a hug and a swift kiss, and the trouble was all over like a spring shower, and we were good friends again. And I was glad of that because I was going away and I was really very fond of

Peggy, though like most women she was unreasonable at times and I seemed to have bunted into one of them. For I declare I could not think, for the life of me, what I had said to make such a fuss about.

CHAPTER VIII

VOYAGEURS

IF I described our journey in detail you would find it wearisome. Some men have the gift of literary panorama, if I may call it that for want of a better phrase. They can take you with them mile after mile, and day after day, and by their magic you can see the trees bud, and the leaves change and fall, the waters ruffle with light airs or surge with the weight of winds, and the storm clouds mount in the sky. You read, and as you do so, you hear the long thunder of rapids, the cries of birds and the whistle of their wings, the night-howl of the hunting beasts and the thousand voices of the wilderness great and small, but all in your very ears. You go where these men take you, borne untiring on the wings of their fancy. But that magic is not mine, and wise is he who, knowing his own limitations, goes not beyond them. The cobbler should stick to his last. Many a good farmer has been spoiled to make a poor preacher or teacher. And when one is telling a story of men and events he should confine himself to them, and if he must indulge in extraneous

flights of fancy now and then, he should make them very brief.

But nevertheless I would have you remember that I was a boy on my first long trail, and even yet, when I recall those days, a portion of their glamour clings to them. To me every hour of every day was golden. And as we journeyed deeper and deeper into that vast, mysterious country, and the waterways and portages and ranges which had been but names to me were passed on, I felt that I was indeed living romance, as the old-time voyageurs lived it. To my eyes, all was colored by it. But to most of my companions I have no doubt everything was exceedingly commonplace.

Mr. Fothergill, indeed, seemed to enjoy himself thoroughly. This existence, he said, was the thing for him. He spoke scornfully of civilization, and pityingly of people who lived in cities without tasting the delights of the wilderness. And he was loud and frequent in appreciation of the beauties of lake and hill and sunset skies.

On the other hand Jim Dunleath had little to say on such subjects. And somehow that very fact told me that he felt more deeply than Mr. Fothergill with all his words. For my experience has been that the deeper emotions dry up the fountains of speech in most of us. He says the least who feels the most. In affliction I have found more

sympathy in a handgrip than in words. And even when it comes to fighting the man who comes at you roaring curses and threats is apt to be less in earnest about it than the silent fellow a little white about the nostrils.

So far as events went, each day was much like another. There was rain and shine, wind and calm, rapids and portages, and steady, monotonous work. Each day began by the wink of Louis' cooking fire and the smell of wood-smoke in the dawn, followed by his whoop for breakfast. Next, the quick rolling of blankets and stowing of dunnage, water on the fire, and the dip and swish of paddles. A brief halt at noon to eat and relax cramped limbs and muscles. Dip and swish and tunk of paddle again. And once more the landing, the quick lick-lock of axes, the fire in the growing dusk, the hour around it while the men smoked and talked; and last the welcome blankets and the bright stars of the Northern night above the sleeping camp.

At last we turned up the Brule, where the old raiders, finding their way blocked by the company's men, had broken away northward. And what a beautiful thing is a boy's imagination! I could see them in fancy, those men of twenty years before, their canoes deep with plunder, paddles driving steadily in an endeavor to shake off the pursuit which had fastened on them. No

doubt every boy is a bandit at heart. At any rate my sympathies were with Nitche McNab and his men. And as I swung my paddle hour after hour I pretended that I was Nitche himself. But of course I kept that to myself, for I would have been very much ashamed to have been even suspected of such childishness.

It has always interested me to observe how strangers thrown together immediately sort themselves into groups. This process went on among us. Old Hayes consorted principally with the younger men. He was continually yarning to them of rich strikes, of will-o'-the-wispy rumors of gold, of fabled creeks and lodes in which he himself believed devoutly and of which, therefore, he told impressively. Gold-seeking, according to him, was the only work fit for young men of spirit. And his words fired their imaginations.

"What do you know about this here trip, anyway, old-timer?" I heard Conover ask him once. "Is it gold the ogemows are after?"

"Why don't you ask 'em?" Hayes returned.

"I asked Tom," Conover returned, "but I don't get no satisfaction from him."

"Tom's wise," said Hayes.

"Then it *is* gold," Conover concluded.

"I didn't say so," Hayes returned, but his tone was an admission.

"No, you didn't. But I can tell you if it's gold I'm goin' to stake me a claim almighty close to discovery."

"You're workin' for wages," Hayes pointed out, and Conover swore.

"I can fix that any time I see pay dirt," he said, and I heard no more.

But this conversation amused me, for it seemed to show that Hayes had been quite misled by Fothergill's diplomatic words to Ballou. After hearing it I took a gold pan and washed sand and gravel near our camps, and in a day or two all the men but Ballou were at it themselves, which I considered a huge joke.

It was old Hayes who endeavored to pump me. He came up behind me one evening when I was fishing.

"Ain't seen you panning any dirt for a couple of days," he said casually.

"I didn't find anything," I replied. And I added mischievously: "I guess there isn't anything right around here."

He digested that.

"Can't tell about gold. Half the rich strikes was made by accident. I'll bet I've walked over millions in my time, not knowin' it was there."

"Did you ever find any?"

"Sure. I was never first on one of the big creeks, but I've made stakes now and again."

"What did you do with them?" I asked curiously.

He grinned wickedly.

"Ask me somethin' easy, Bob. I blowed 'em. When I had the dust I surely played 'em high and hard." He spoke with a certain pride. "Us old-timers is built that way. I'm about due for another stake now. I feel it in my bones. Shouldn't wonder if there was good stuff somewheres up in this country."

His eyes searched my face; but I went on with my fishing.

"Now here," he said. "I'm an old-timer, and no man can give me any pointers on placer workin'. You're a kid, but I've took a fancy to you. If I find anything I'm a-goin' to let you in on it as my partner. You won't be the first young feller that's got rich workin' with the old man. Same way, if you strike anything you'll let me know. You're about as apt to as me, because that's the way it goes. We'll stake as partners and work together."

"All right," I replied, "if we find gold."

I suppose he thought he had laid a foundation, for he asked me a number of leading questions, but got nothing out of me. And presently he left me.

Ordinarily Jim Dunleath and I had the small canoe together, but one day he went with Fothergill, and Ballou came in with me. Quite casually he proceeded to question me about my three weeks' trip with Dunleath. Where had we been, exactly? What had we seen? Had we met any people? And so on.

I answered his questions, but of course, said nothing of finding the bones of Joe Barbe. And he switched to our visit to Neepaw, asking if I had had a good time there. I told him no, that I was anxious to get away.

"To start on this here trip, you mean?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Yes, of course, you would be. What kept you there so long?"

"We were waiting for Mr. Fothergill."

"He wasn't on time?"

"Oh, I guess he came as fast as he could," I admitted incautiously.

"When Dunleath sent him word to come, I s'pose?"

"Yes," I replied, not knowing what else to say.

"He dropped all holts and come right along," he deduced. "Well, I s'pose he thought it was worth while?"

But I did not respond to that lead and he asked

me no more questions. Afterward I repeated the conversation to Dunleath.

"He's a long-headed old fox," he said, "and I don't blame him for being curious. I would be, myself, if I were in his place. He would know that I sent for Fothergill. And I rather think he suspects that our little camping trip has something to do with this one. If there wasn't the possibility of meeting some of the company's men they might all be told, for all I'd care. But with that possibility we'd better keep quiet. Naturally they'd know that the company would be interested in any fur cache, even though they've never heard of Nitche McNab. You know that seems odd to me. I should think old-timers like them would have heard of him."

"Oh, I don't know. They weren't in this part of the country at the time, and McClintock said the company kept the whole thing quiet."

"That's so, of course. Well, anyway, don't let them pump you. We'll tell them when we get to those lakes and not before."

Now up to that time we had all gotten along harmoniously, but that very night I ran foul of McGregor's hasty temper—or perhaps he ran foul of mine—and Dunleath became involved in it. I was carrying a pail of water for Louis, and with it in my hand I tried to step across McGregor's legs as

he lay between me and the cooking fire. Somehow I stumbled, and upset half the contents of the bucket on him. He was up in a minute, and cuffed me open-handed on the ear. Instantly my own temper, never very well controlled, flared up. I caught up a knot of pitch wood and threw it. It struck him fair on the mouth, splitting his lip, and the next moment he had me by the throat, shook me till my brain rattled, and then struck me deliberately in the face. I struck back, but I had about as much chance as a rat in a terrier's jaws.

"Hey, stop dat, McGregor!" cried Louis Beef. "For why you try for bus' up leetle kid, hey?"

"Mind your own business, you!" snarled McGregor, and drew back his hand again.

But it never struck me, for Jim Dunleath, clearing the intervening space in two great bounds, caught McGregor's wrist, and as the latter half turned, lifted a terrific right-hand punch at his jaw. It came straight up from the heel with a stiffening leg and a lifting shoulder, and it cracked home like the blow of a mallet. I felt a beautiful vicarious satisfaction in it. McGregor simply dropped in his tracks, greatly, I think, to the surprise of every one, except Dunleath, and a good deal to the disappointment of the men.

But McGregor, though momentarily knocked out, was up again in a few seconds.

"You hit me when I wasn't looking," he told Dunleath.

"You ought to have been looking," Dunleath replied, "seeing that you were punching a kid. However, if you want it that way I can hit you when you are looking."

"That will suit me," said McGregor. "Are you ready now?"

"Any time," said Jim Dunleath. "Only I warn you, McGregor, that if you want to follow this up you're in for a lively time."

The men had dropped whatever they were doing. Louis stood with a spoon in his hand, his mouth half open, and a look of childish delight upon his features. Ballou's face was expressionless. Old Hayes was leaning forward hungrily, his lips twitching like the nose of an old hound which strikes a familiar scent. But they were cheated of their amusement, for Mr. Fothergill came hurrying up and shoved in between them. Of course he had no authority over Dunleath, but as it was McGregor who was looking for more trouble, he succeeded in stopping the impending fight. Later I overheard a conversation between him and Jim Dunleath.

"But I couldn't let him beat up the kid," the latter was saying.

"Well, you could have stopped that without a

rough-house. You're too fond of scrapping, Jim. Bob had no business to throw that knot at him."

"If he hadn't thrown it he wouldn't have been worth scrapping for. We were kids ourselves once. Young wildcat! He'd have used a gun on McGregor if I hadn't butted in."

Mr. Fothergill grunted. "Here," said he, "everything was going harmoniously, and you must punch one of our best men."

"Well, he can't quit," Dunleath pointed out, "unless he wants to take a long walk."

"That's not it. You act on impulse, and you destroy the spirit of good feeling and comradeship that should exist all around."

"Which was so strongly in evidence when McGregor was punching the kid," Dunleath retorted. "And now, Wally, if you have any more calling down to do try it on somebody else—McGregor, for instance. I've had all I want of it."

"Oh, all right," said Mr. Fothergill rather stiffly. "You needn't go up in the air about it. I'm merely trying to tell you that McGregor will carry a grudge, if I know anything about him."

"If you hadn't horned in," said Dunleath, "he'd have worked out his grudge by this time. If he had licked me he would have been satisfied; and if I had trimmed him he'd have known that it was no lucky punch that put him down."

"It wouldn't have done—wouldn't have done at all," said Mr. Fothergill. "I know you can scrap, but I'll bet McGregor can, too. If he had licked you he'd never have let it go at that, and neither would the other young fellows. You'd have seen it in their eyes and heard it in their voices every day of your life. Then you'd have tried him or one of them again. That's human nature—yours, anyway. It was far better not to fight at all."

But one result was to start a controversy as to the respective prowess of Dunleath and McGregor, in which the latter had the most supporters, Louis being almost alone in picking the former.

"Aw, what's the use of talkin'?" said old Hayes. "Mac can whip this here Dunleath in a rough an' tumble any day."

"You t'ink dat, hey?" said Louis. "Well, now I'll tol' you somet'ing: De rougher dey tumble de more dat Dunleat' mak heem look lak suckaire!"

I told Jim Dunleath, who merely laughed and said he hoped that Louis was a good judge. And I think Hayes told McGregor.

CHAPTER IX

AHTIKAMAG

"WE'D better take Ballou into our confidence now," said Mr. Fothergill, when we were as nearly as we could tell within a couple of days' journey of the Burntwood Lakes. "We'll have to do it anyway, to find this Ahtikamag Lake, and we may as well do it now."

"Yes, I suppose so," Dunleath admitted. "Ask him to come down here for a minute, Bob."

So I went and got Ballou from an early camp we had made, and brought him to them where they sat on the river bank. Mr. Fothergill explained at length what we were after, and Ballou listened in silence, smoking thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, when Mr. Fothergill had finished, "I may as well tell you straight I'd have liked it better if you had told me this at the start."

"That's what I told you, Jim," said Fothergill.

"So you did," Dunleath admitted. "It wasn't that I didn't trust you, Ballou, but I simply wasn't going to take any chances. I'd do the same thing again, and I'm not going to apologize for it. The fewer men who know a secret the safer it is."

"Yes, that's so," said Ballou. "That's right enough. Of course, if the company got to know of these furs they'd be right after 'em. I s'pose you're going to keep 'em?"

"We're going to get them first," Dunleath replied. "If the company wants them it can pay a good, fat salvage."

"The company," said Ballou, "never paid for anything it could take. I'd like to see that letter you are going on."

Dunleath handed it to him, and he read slowly, his lips moving soundlessly with the words.

"No use talking," he said with a sort of admiration, "Nitche was cunnin' as an old dog fox. There wasn't another man in the outfit with the brains to do what he done. It took some nerve, too. He fooled 'em all. But he died like a sick wolf. Well, serve him right. He tried to double-cross his own tillikums."

"He thought they tried to double-cross him."

"Well, it don't matter much, now. He's dead, and likely most of them are, too." He shook his head thoughtfully. "So it was Nitche you meant when you asked me if I knew any McNabs."

"Yes. It's strange you never heard of him."

"Oh, I'd heard of him, all right, but it never struck me at the time. It's years since I'd heard of him, and then I never knew him to be called

anything but 'Nitche.' When you said his name was Angus, I guess that put me off. Same way with the others, I guess."

"Then what McClintock says is apt to be correct, I suppose?"

"More'n apt to be. He'd know. Did he say who was with Nitche on this raid—give the names of any of his gang?"

"No. He said there were a dozen or more. I guess they were a hard lot."

"A man needed to be hard to travel with Nitche. McClintock didn't tell you who the two men was that was caught, nor what happened to 'em?"

"No. I understood that they were forced to tell what they knew. McClintock mentioned no names, and I don't think I asked for them."

"A fire and a hot iron," said Ballou, "will make most men talk."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Mr. Fothergill. "There wouldn't be anything like that, Tom."

"You can bet," said Ballou, "that when they started in to make them boys confidential, they weren't too polite about it."

"Well," said Mr. Fothergill, "I suppose there won't be any trouble in finding this cache, Tom. The directions seem explicit enough."

"A lot of things can happen in twenty years," Ballou replied, shaking his head. "Trees blow

down and others grow up. Twenty years will green a burnt country till you won't know it. And a fire will fix a timber country till you won't know *that*. Rocks move with slides. You can't tell."

"But you can find this Lake Ahtikamag, can't you?"

Ballou reflected for a moment. "Yes," he replied, "I know that when I come to it."

"Then that's the main thing," said Mr. Fothergill optimistically. "We'll find this cache without any trouble. We'll go home loaded with furs."

"Natural products of the country," Ballou commented dryly, by which it was evident that Mr. Fothergill's descriptive phrase had stuck in his memory.

"Huh—what's that?" said the latter, somewhat embarrassed. "Well, they *are*, you know, Tom. That was the exact truth."

"So it was," Ballou admitted. "I'm not kickin'."

After supper, as usual, the men lay around the fire, their pipes going. Fothergill and Dunleath sat apart, talking in low tones. Old Hayes was spinning one of his interminable yarns. But Tom Ballou sat by himself, his elbows on his knees, both hands cupped around the bowl of his pipe, and had nothing to say to any one.

I helped Louis clean up, and afterward I strolled away with him to the river bank, where he sat

down and filled his pipe, and opened the last button of his shirt, exposing his great, hairy chest to the cool of the night air drafting along the river.

"Sacré!" said Louis feelingly. "Dat cookin' she's no job for man. I roas' myself for mak' dat pork an' bean an' bannock. An' dat bonch she's eat heem up lak wolf, an' nevaire tell me no t'anks!"

"Somebody has to cook," I said, with little sympathy, I am afraid, and Louis snorted.

"Yas! Well, mebbe if some of dose feller try it heemself he don't find heem some snap, I bet my life. Batême! I don' know for why I evair learn to cook, me."

But I paid no attention to his grumbling, for just then my eye was caught by some curious old wounds in the bark of a poplar. They looked like initials cut in the bark of a young tree and overgrown.

"What are these, Louis?" I asked.

"Mebbe bear claw heem," Louis suggested after casual inspection.

"No, they aren't claw marks. It looks to me as if somebody had cut his name there a long time ago."

"Hey?" Louis ejaculated. "Cut hees name." He rose and looked at the old marks. "Well, by dam!" he exclaimed and scratched his curls, looking around

in a puzzled sort of way as if he were trying to remember something.

"I can't make it out, can you?"

"Non!" Louis replied. "Pas du toute. I guess she don' mean not'ing, dat."

"It's a name or initials," I stated positively. "I wonder who cut it there. I wonder if it was Nitche McNab."

I mentioned the name thoughtlessly, but Louis fairly jumped.

"Nitche McNab!" he cried. "What you know 'bout heem, hey?"

"Just what I've heard. He used to be up this way, didn't he?"

"How I know?" growled Louis. "He's bad man, dat, an' dead since long tam."

"But I thought you didn't know him. When we asked you if you knew him—you and Tom and Hayes—you had never heard of him."

"You ain't hax 'bout Nitche McNab when I'm dere."

Neither we had. Like Ballou, he had not identified Nitche by his given name. He asked me numerous questions, and since Ballou had been told our object, and as everybody would know in a couple of days or so, I saw no reason why I should not enlighten Louis.

"Bagosh," he cried, "is dat for why we come here?"

"Yes. But don't tell any one just yet. Tom knows."

"By dam," he cried fiercely, "he's lie to me!"

"He didn't know till an hour ago."

"You know where dat cache is at?"

"I know where it is said to be. I can't tell you just now. I guess maybe I shouldn't have said anything to you until we got there."

"Dat's all right, mon vieux," he replied. "I don't say not'ing, me."

As it turned out we were nearer the chain of the Burntwood Lakes than we had thought, for the next afternoon we opened the first of them. It lay beneath the slope of the afternoon sun, a watery gem, dotted here and there with small, rocky islands and shored with fir and spruce and cottonwood. As we went on, the islands became more numerous, and the shores deeply indented with bays and receding channels, so that at times it was hard to tell just which way the lake itself trended.

We were glad of still water, after the current we had fought for so long. And we made camp that night in a sheltered bay inhabited by a brood of half-grown fish ducks which flapped away in fright. Here we came upon the spot of an old camp fire, but the rain had washed the ashes over

the charred sticks. Mr. Fothergill was positive that it had been an Indian camp, and nobody disputed him.

"What's the name of this lake, Tom?" he asked.

"The Injuns call it 'Saguhegun Menesansun.' Good name, ain't it?"

"Very appropriate," Mr. Fothergill agreed.

"What does it mean?" Dunleath asked. And Mr. Fothergill hesitated and stuttered:

"It means—er—well, it's a little hard to put it in English. But a free translation—a very free one —would be—let me see——"

"It means 'Lake-of-many-little-islands,'" I said, to help him out, and I could see a laugh in Jim Dunleath's eyes.

"Yes, I suppose that would be a fairly correct translation," said Mr. Fothergill. "It doesn't convey the precise idea, but it will serve." And he asked Ballou about Ahtikamag, which in the Ojibway tongue means "whitefish."

"It's the last one," Ballou replied. "They lie sorter north and south. We go through this and two more, and then we come to Ahtikamag."

"Bagosh," Louis Beef put in, "I t'ink dat Whitefish Lac, she's——"

"We come to Ahtikamag like I said," Ballou repeated. "It's the last lake, and then there's river again. We can't go wrong."

Louis opened his mouth and shut it again without saying anything. Old Hayes cut off a chew of tobacco and licked his knife blade as a dog cleans a plate.

"Ahtikamag!" he said. "We keep straight ahead for it, Tom, hey?"

"Sure," said Ballou. "Unless you think you know better."

"Me?" said Hayes. "No, of course not. This country's plumb strange to me. Funny thing, too, ain't it? I been around quite a lot, but I ain't never seen these lakes. If you asked me to take you to this Whitefish Lake I'd be as apt as not to git balled up and take you another way that'd be dead wrong."

"Well, I'm not askin' you," Ballou told him shortly.

He seemed put out about something, for I had never heard him use that tone to Hayes before. However, later the two of them and Louis went down to the beach and smoked together most amicably.

Mr. Fothergill and Dunleath spread their blankets beneath a big spruce and turned in. So did Ballou. I did the same, nearer the fire, and I lay there comfortably, listening to old Hayes talking to the younger men, grumbling at creation in general, as is the custom of many old men who,

whether by their own fault or not, have not had what they consider their deserts.

"It's all right for you boys now," he was saying. "You're young and skookum, and work don't tire you because you ain't had enough of it yet. But wait thirty years—or twenty, even. What better are you goin' to be fixed then than you be now? What do you do? Why, in the winter you're in the shanties lumberin', or out trappin'. No chance to make a stake that way—no more'n grub and wages. In the spring you're on the river. In the summer you're grubbin' away at a little clearin' or somethin', or you git a job like this here. What good is any of it to you, more'n to keep you in grub? You don't git no chance to make a stake, that's what I mean."

"That's so," Conover admitted. "But what else is there to do? I don't see nothing."

"Well, there ain't so much now, for a fact," Hayes agreed. "In the old days it was diff'rent. Them was sure the times. Money come easy, and we blowed her like men. Why, take them placers, like Cariboo and Wild Horse and a half a dozen others you don't hear nothin' about now! Look what was cleaned up! Millions!"

"They are worked out now," said McGregor.

"Yeh, but one of these days somebody'll strike it somewheres else. If I'm alive you bet I won't

be at the hind end of the stampede, nuther. And in the old days there was a heap of money made easy other ways."

"How?" Jordan asked.

"Free tradin' with the Injuns. Bringin' in whisky. The two got sorter mixed up pretty often. An Injun trades better for a few shots of hooch." Old Hayes chuckled wickedly. "And then there was other ways that was mebbe some off-color. Not that I've got much fault to find with them myself, because nobody was out but them that could afford to lose."

"Well, what ways was them?" Jordan asked.

Hayes laughed. "I dunno's I ought to tell you. You might not look at 'em like I do. Your Sunday-school trainin' might set you ag'in' 'em."

The phrase which Jordan uttered was certainly not acquired in Sunday school.

"You don't need to worry about me, old-timer," he said. "Go ahead and spit it out of you."

"Well, some people would call 'em hold-ups, mebbe," Hayes resumed. "Now here: You've all heard tell of old Nitche McNab, I s'pose. Look what he done. The company wouldn't let him trade with the Injuns, and put a price on his scalp. Nitche declared war on 'em. He went and held 'em up, and took their furs right out of their posts. Myself, I don't see no harm in that, much."

"Nor me," Conover agreed, and the others muttered assent.

"Only he made nothing by it," said McGregor. "My father knew McNab, and he has told me that they did not get away with the furs."

"Well, that wasn't his fault," said Hayes. "What I'm gettin' at is that them men wasn't satisfied to work along for no wages. They took a chance. They had a fortune piled in their canoes that time, and only for bad luck they'd have got away with it. Why. say, them furs, if we had 'em to-day to split among us here in even shares, every one of us would be rich. We wouldn't have to go into no woods loggin' when she's fit to freeze hell if the devil left the back door open; nor we wouldn't have to go hikin' off into no hills lookin' for gold where there ain't none, and bein' et alive by flies an' shook up with fever 'n' ager an' crippled by rheumatiz; nor we wouldn't have to grub out stumps and roots so's 't we could grow a few blasted spuds 'n' sech truck. We could go an' live in a real town, an' live high—wine, an' shows, an' take a whirl at the games if we wanted to, an' you young fellers would sure be some popular with the girls. But what's the use of talkin'? We ain't got 'em, an' nobody ever will git 'em. There'll never be times like them ag'in. The young men nowadays ain't game to take a chance on anything

that's a leetle ag'in' the law. And there ain't nothin' with money in it that ain't ag'in' the law."

"What did you ever do against the law yourself?" McGregor asked with a sneer.

"I'd be a sucker to tell you," Hayes returned, "so I won't. But whatever I done I got way with, didn't I? You never heard of me bein' in jail, did you? And I never let a little thing like a fool law stand between me an' a stake. You bet I didn't. I come into this country when you made your own law accordin' to the hand you held."

"And that's the right way," Conover asseverated with an oath.

"Ay," McGregor agreed. "It is the old man that will be telling me now and then of the old days. He had little use for the law, and I have as little."

"I'll bet you haven't," Hayes approved. "Your dad was a good man. You put me in mind of him, many ways." And then he began a long-winded yarn about some placer, and in the middle of it I dropped to sleep under my bush.

In the morning we encountered a heavy wind, which tore the lake into choppy waves. It was too stiff to paddle against, and so we put ashore to wait till it dropped. But it blew that day and all night and most of the next day, so that we could do nothing.

Lake Ahtikamag, when we opened it, was the

largest we had seen, being about twenty miles in length by about three in breadth. It had several islands, and one of these was of a most peculiar formation, having high walls of rock so that a landing could be made only in one place, and in the middle of the island there was a huge sink-hole, like the mouth of a giant well, the sides dropping straight down. This hole Dunleath and I discovered later, and we sounded it with a line but could get no bottom; nor did there appear to be any water in it though we let our line down far below the lake level.

We ran down the lake rapidly about sunset, with a rising stern wind and a following sea which made the canoes leap and surge and yaw, and finally Ballou's canoe, which was in the lead, turned into a bay into which a good-sized creek emptied.

"Here we are," he said as we beached beside him. "I guess this is your creek."

"The letter says the creek is near the upper end of the lake," said Dunleath. "This is only about half way."

"This is the only creek," Ballou replied, "so far as I know, but it's easy enough to find out. Anyway, this is a good place to camp, and in the morning we can see."

After supper Mr. Fothergill took the men into his confidence, a thing he had been aching to do for

weeks, telling them that we had come to find a lost fur cache and that we were now on the very ground. It did not create any sensation. Conover asked if it was Nitche McNab's old cache, and he admitted it, at which I saw Dunleath frown, though I could not see what difference it made, since Ballou knew, and I had admitted it to Louis. No doubt all knew about it. Mr. Fothergill went on to say that if we found what we had been led to expect, he would double every man's wages. He waited for applause, but got none. They took the announcement impassively. For a moment I thought I saw the ghost of a sardonic grin flicker around old Hayes' mouth. But I must have been mistaken, for he backed up Ballou when the latter expressed his thanks.

That night for a long time I was too excited to sleep. Dunleath, too, was restless, and finally he rose on his elbow, filled his pipe and lit it. By the light of the match he saw my eyes.

"I thought you were asleep," he said.

"No, I keep thinking of the cache."

"So do I. It means a lot to me."

"We'll find it," I prophesied. "This must be the right place unless there's another creek, and that's easy to find out."

"Yes, that's so. Of course it's a gamble—the worth of whatever we do find." We talked in

whispers, though there was little danger of waking Mr. Fothergill, who was snoring. "Listen to him!" Dunleath went on. "That's what it is to have money. An assured income beats an easy conscience as a soporific. Money may bring some cares, but it gets rid of a lot of others. There are times in a man's life when it is nearly indispensable as a means to an end. Good night, old boy!"

But I lay awake long after he had tapped out his pipe and gone to sleep. My boyish imagination was busy. I could see the great, swarthy Nitche McNab and his henchman, Joe Barbe, stooping beneath the bales of furs, trotting in feverish haste inland from their canoe, laboring like demons lest they should be interrupted at their task. And when I slept I dreamed that I was working with them, caching the priceless spoil of the northern tip of a continent, while the animals which had worn it as their garments ran nakedly beside us, ghastly and ghostly carrion, mocking our efforts with mews and growls.

CHAPTER X

FAILURE

WE were up at dawn; and as the sunshine crept down the low hills to the west we sorted out axes and picks and shovels and crowbars, and started up the creek.

The going was rough. The bush was thick and there was down timber crisscrossed and piled at every angle by some big wind. Probably it had all been standing when Nitche and Joe Barbe packed in the furs. If not they must have had a sweet job.

Soon the creek bottom narrowed. The sides became high, rocky, with much loose shale and many fractures. On the whole, it was about what the letter had led us to expect; and here and there, in the creek bed, there were reddish boulders.

At the end of what we estimated to be half a mile Mr. Fothergill called a halt. Sure enough, on the opposite side of the creek, high up near the rim of the bank, was a big, broken fir stub, surmounted by the rough, stick nest of a fish hawk.

"By George!" Mr. Fothergill exclaimed. "I've hit the very spot." He spoke as if he alone were responsible for our guidance.

"Look's like it," Jim Dunleath admitted. "But I don't see the boulder."

"Hidden by second growth, likely. Anyway, there is the hawk's nest."

"And there is another," said Dunleath, pointing farther up the creek.

I looked and saw a second hawk's nest. Indeed these lakes seemed to be the habitat of many fish hawks. All along it were their nests, old and new. This bird returns to the same nest, year after year. And I presume some instinct brings its offspring back to the district where they were hatched. These in turn build nests for themselves. But the fish hawk is somewhat exclusive of habit, each pair being jealous of infringement on their chosen fishing ground, and so the nests are rarely close together. Ordinarily they are near the water, though I have seen them miles inland against a mountainside, and the birds flapping heavily to them with their prey in their claws.

"Well," said Mr. Fothergill, "it's one or the other. We'll look here first for the boulder."

We crossed the creek and climbed the opposite bank, which was the more sloping of the two, and covered with a tangle of small growth. Through this we pushed, quartering the ground like hunting dogs. But we found no boulder.

"It's mighty funny," said Ballou. "This seems to be the place, all right."

"How old is that nest?" asked Dunleath.

"Hard to say. Them birds fix up their old nests every season. I guess they nest one place till they die. This looks pretty old. But then so does that other nest. I wish we could find that rock. Of course it may have loosened and rolled down into the creek bed. Well, let's look around the other nest."

But though we subjected the vicinity of the other nest to a like careful search we found no boulder. We looked at every rock which seemed to have rolled down into the creek bed, and found several which might roughly have answered the description, though we could find no line on any of them, and even if we had found the mark it would not have done us much good.

"Well," said Mr. Fothergill, "this is the place, without a doubt. One of those rocks is the boulder Nitche speaks of. But as it is out of place it is not very important. The only thing to do is to pick out likely spots opposite each nest, and excavate. In that way we are certain to find the cache, though it may take a good deal of work."

"I'm not satisfied that this is the right creek," said Dunleath. "I'm going to the end of the lake, just to make sure."

I went with him. We found one small creek and followed it inland; but it merely ran along through brush, with sloping, couleelike sides, and no sign of a hawk's nest or a boulder. And so we came back convinced that Mr. Fothergill's plan was the only feasible one.

It was hard, monotonous labor. And after we had been at it for several days there grew the depressing feeling of futility. The men began to growl among themselves. They were not hired, they complained, to strip the whole country down to bedrock. And they began to scoff at the existence of a cache. However, they kept at it for a week, during which time they had really moved an immense amount of soil, gravel, and loose rock. And then old Hayes quit cold.

"I ain't no bohunk!" he declared with an oath. "I'm a heap too old to use a muckstick, anyhow. You young fellers can keep on if you like. I'm through."

"Me too!" said McGregor.

"Yas, by dam!" the half-breed declared.

"You see," Ballou explained to Mr. Fothergill who was most indignant at this defection, "they don't take no stock in this Nitche yarn. The way they figger it out there ain't no chance of findin' the cache. And then they say they was hired for canoemen, and not for a steady pick-and-shovel

job. So they was, too, when you get right down to it. They didn't mind at first, but they say it's lastin' too long."

"Don't you consider McNab's letter genuine?" asked Mr. Fothergill.

"Well, of course I never seen no writing of Nitche's," Ballou replied. "By the way it was found, I guess it's the real thing. There always was a yarn that he had furs cached some place, and this place fits all right. But the marks he speaks of ain't in place. There's two hawks' nests, and neither of 'em may be the right one. That may have blowed down. We've stripped off a lot of surface and found nothing, and it begins to look like a matter of luck. It's your shout, and far's I'm concerned I'll stay with you as long as you want, and so'll Louis. But the other boys won't. Maybe if you was to put a time limit on the digging, say three or four days or a week more, I might be able to talk 'em into giving you a run for your money. Would that be any use?"

Mr. Fothergill spluttered angrily. "I came to find those furs," he declared, "and I'll do it. Bunch of quitters. Afraid of a litte bit of work. Glad enough to be on a pay roll, though. Why, I'm working as hard as any of them, myself."

This was true enough, though his work was not very effective.

"Well, of course," said Ballou, "it's your shout. I was just tellin' you how she stacks up to me. As I say, me and Louis won't quit till you do. But the rest has quit right now."

"There's no use getting mad about it, Wally," said Jim Dunleath. "This is a condition, and not a theory. You can't make the men work. And what Ballou says about the proposition we're up against is correct. Finding the cache without the proper landmarks is entirely a matter of luck. We can't systematically strip the entire sidehill even if we all work at it. Still less by ourselves. It seems to me we can't do better than to let Tom coax another week's work out of the men if he can."

To this Mr. Fothergill finally agreed, and Ballou interviewed the strikers. He had considerable difficulty persuading them to resume work, but at last they came around agreeing to stay with the job for another week, but that, they said frankly, was the limit.

And they carried out their part of the bargain honestly. They worked hard, without shirking or grumbling. Even Mr. Fothergill had to admit that. But at the end of the week we had found absolutely no sign of the cache.

"The boys want to put a proposition up to you," said Ballou. "They want to do the fair thing, and

if you was very strong for it, they'd work another week, though they don't think it's no use. But if you're going to quit, you won't need them no more. In that case they figger they'd like to go over into the Pink. That breed has some yarn about placer ground. I don't s'pose there's a thing in it, but the boys wants to go. And they'd like to buy a couple of canoes and a grubstake from you and pull out. That way of course you'd save wages for the back trip. What do you think of it?"

"They've kept their bargain, and we'll keep ours," said Dunleath. "We may as well quit now as a week from now. We may as well save what we can, Wally."

"They can take their wages and canoes and grub and go to the devil!" said Mr. Fothergill.

"They want to buy 'em straight, so's there'll be no kick nor obligation either way," said Ballou. "You put your price on 'em, and they'll take 'em at that."

"I'll leave it to you," Mr. Fothergill told him. "Sell them what they want for whatever it's worth."

"How many are going?" Dunleath asked.

"All but Louis and me," Ballou replied.

But the next day Ballou said that he was thinking of going with them himself.

"They want me to go," he explained somewhat

apologetically. "They say I know the country better than any of 'em. I dunno but I'd like to go. When a man's been a prospector he never gets over it. You don't really need me no more. Louis will go along with you and cook, and get the home camp ready for winter if it should freeze up before we get back. What do you think?"

"It's your shout, Tom," said Mr. Fothergill. "There are no strings on you."

"Then I'll go with the boys," Ballou decided. "I've been sorter hankerin' for a little prospectin'. Not that I expect to find more'n colors, but I like the game."

On that basis matters were arranged. We retained the largest canoe, which would hold the four of us and our outfit very nicely. One canoe was cached, to be picked up by the men on their homeward way, and they took the others with them.

When they had gone we lingered for a day, poking around, hoping against hope, which I suppose is human nature. But we found nothing whatever, nor could we avoid the irresistible conclusion of absolute failure which settled upon us.

"Oh, well," said Jim Dunleath, "what's the use of lingering over the grave? Let's get out of here."

"I hate to quit!" growled Mr. Fothergill. "I'm dead sure that cache is here somewhere, and next

year I'm going to come up with an outfit that will work, and find it."

"You'll only throw good coin after bad," Dunleath told him. "It's a dead card. I'm sorry I let you in for it."

"What the devil do I care for the money?" Mr. Fothergill returned. "I hate to give up, that's all. And then I know you needed those furs in your business."

And so when we pulled out for home we were a very glum outfit. Mr. Fothergill nursed his grievance against the men. Dunleath was silent, evidently bitterly disappointed. Louis had nothing to say, but kept shaking his head and grumbling French oaths to himself without any apparent cause. And I was very down in the mouth, for my dreams of wealth were gone, and I did not believe that Mr. Fothergill would go to the expense of organizing a second expedition.

We cleared the lakes and got into the river, and were just going ashore for the night, when a canoe with two white men appeared, coming upstream. It was a slim, though weatherbeaten craft, and by the way it lifted at every stroke it was plain that its occupants knew their business.

"Evenin', gents," said the man in the bow. He had a gray beard and childlike blue eyes, and I had a faint recollection of having seen him some-

where. But when I looked at his partner in the stern and saw red, curly hair, and eyes of a hard, clear blue, with a mocking, whimsical devil looking out of them I knew both of them.

"Dinny Pack!" I cried. He looked at me, his eyes puckering at the corners.

"That's who," he admitted. "But I can't make no come-back, young feller."

"Bob Cory," I told him, "on the Carcajou. You licked Nootka Charlie when he kissed Peggy."

"Well, I'm durned!" he exclaimed. "Are you that kid? You've shot up and filled out so I wouldn't have knowed you. How's chances to camp near here. Ike and me ain't seen no white folks for a month."

They came ashore with us and shared our supper and fire. They had been knocking around all summer, partly prospecting and partly looking for a good trapping country. Now they were on their way up to the lakes, where they expected to meet two friends of theirs, named Rowan and Cass, who had gone over into the Pink or perhaps the Poorfish, and had arranged to be back about that time.

Dinny Pack volunteered this information. His partner, old Ike Toft, kept silence, smoking contemplatively. Neither asked what we were doing or where we had been. But I told them we had

been to the lakes and were on our way home, and that part of our outfit had gone on to prospect on the other side.

"May meet 'em," said Dinny. "This is sorter new country to me. Ike knows it, though, mighty well. Of course there ain't much country he don't know."

"Now, Dinny!" said his partner deprecatingly.

"Well, there ain't," said Pack. "You been travelin' her forty years, about."

"Oh, well, she's a big country," said Toft modestly.

"It was up here," said Pack to us generally, "that old Nitche McNab cached his furs when he had to make a get-away. Maybe you never heard about that." And taking it for granted that we had not, he told us the story. "Ike," he concluded, "was with the bunch that was after Nitche."

"What? Is that so?" asked Mr. Fothergill.

"Yeh, I was along," Toft admitted.

"And nobody ever found the furs, to your knowledge?"

"Somebody got 'em. We found the cache, but she was empty."

"Have you any theory about that?"

"Well," said Toft, "I allus figgered that Nitche done that. While we was chasin' his gang he

slipped in behind us and lifted the cache himself. That's what I think."

"But what did he do with them?"

"I dunno. I guess he'd cache them again somewheres till he got a chance to get out of the country with them."

This guess of Toft's tallied so exactly with the evidence which we possessed that my respect for him rose.

"Do you think he ever got them out?" Dunleath asked.

"Might have. I never heard no more about him. He seemed to disappear."

"He couldn't have moved the furs very far single-handed," Mr. Fothergill pointed out.

"No," Toft agreed. "But then he wouldn't need to. I guess he cached 'em again somewheres on them lakes. Pretty lakes, ain't they? Which one was you camped on?"

"On Ahtikamag."

"Nice place to camp."

"That's a curious island in it," said Dunleath. "I mean the one with the steep rocky shores and the sink-hole in the middle."

Toft shook his head.

"That island," said he, "ain't in Ahtikamag. That's in Shingoos!"

CHAPTER XI

LOUIS BEEF'S GRIP

WE stared at the speaker and at each other.

"Not in Ahtikamag!" Dunleath exclaimed. "Are you certain?"

"Sure. It's in Shingoos, the last lake as you go through 'em. You go through that lake with all the islands and a couple more smaller ones, and then you strike Shingoos."

"Yes, that's what we did. But we thought it was Ahtikamag."

"No, Ahtikamag lies off to the west. It's fed by the Little Pipe. Unless you was lookin' for it you wouldn't know it was there at all, just passin' through. The channel leadin' in to them lakes looks like a blind bay on Saguhegun." He spoke with the certainty of absolute knowledge.

"By George!" Mr. Fothergill exclaimed. "Old Tom made a mistake."

"It looks like it," Dunleath agreed. "That would account for a lot of things. Do you know," he asked, "if there is a creek making into Ahtikamag on the west side near the upper end?"

"Yeh, about a couple of miles from the end.

She's quite a crick, too. She cañons a half mile or so from the lake, I went up her once, a good many years ago."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Mr. Fothergill exclaimed in disgust. "Here we've wasted two weeks and let our outfit break up. I could have sworn old Tom knew the country. Louis, do you hear that? We made a mistake in the lake."

But Louis, when told what Toft had said, scoffed at it.

"I guess I know bettaire as dat," said he. "I guess I know Tom purty well, an' he don't mak' no mistak', heem."

"Well, I ain't sayin' he did," said Toft mildly. "All I say is that that sink-hole island ain't in Ahtikamag. That's all. I don't know nothin' about this here Tom."

"Bagosh," said Louis, "I see dat island my own self. An' for sure she's dere."

"If you seen her," Toft responded, "you seen her in Shingoos Lake—unless she's moved."

"Bah! You mak' me tire'," scoffed Louis. "I guess you ain't know dis co'ntree bettaire as my partner, ol'-timer."

"I don't claim to," Toft returned. "I'm merely tellin' these gents what I *know,* because they asked me."

"Well, I guess you ain't know so moch," said Louis contemptuously.

Toft let this go without reply; but Dinny Pack took a hand.

"Look here, you big pea soup," said he, "you want to go plumb easy on that line of talk, savvy!"

"Is that so?" Louis retorted ironically. "Well, I guess I do my own talkin', yo'ng feller, wit'out hax you!"

"That will be plenty, Louis," said Dunleath quietly. And to Toft: "Our guide had no doubt that we were in Ahtikamag. He took us there without any hesitation."

"Well, of course I don't know anything about that," Toft replied. "It's none of my business. You asked me about the island and I told you it was in Shingoos. So it is. That's all I've got to say."

"We'll go back," Mr. Fothergill announced. "Will you men take us to the real Ahtikamag?"

The partners looked at each other. They appeared to arrive at an understanding without words.

"If you want us to," Toft replied. "It's pretty much on our way, anyhow."

"Of course we expect to pay you," said Mr. Fothergill. "You name your figure."

"Sho! 'Tain't worth nothin'," said Toft.

"It is to us," Dunleath told him. "It's pretty important."

"So," said Toft. He asked no question, even by inflection. Possibly this decided Dunleath.

"We are after Nitche McNab's cache," said he, "and we think it is in Ahtikamag. We'd like to make a deal with you to help us find it."

"You can make it," Toft replied.

They made it then and there, and Dunleath told him what we knew about Nitche McNab and the cache. But Louis, who had listened scornfully, made objection.

"Bagosh," said he, "I t'ink it's all crazee bizness, me. Tom he's know dem lac all right. We hunt on dat Ahtikamag already. I ain't want for go back dere an' waste my time."

"You're paid for it," Dunleath reminded him tartly. "And we're not going to the same place."

"You'll go some fool place," Louis returned. "I want for pass myself on dat Carcajou, me. I got plentee for do dere. Dat's de bargain we mak' wit' you. Dem boys an' Tom dey go prospec', an' we pass ourself on home."

"Nonsense, Louis!" said Mr. Fothergill. "We're not going home now, when there's a good chance of finding what we came after."

"Good chance, not'ing!" scoffed Louis. "You

hear crazee story 'bout some lac, an' you believe heem. Dose man she's fool you wit' dam lie!"

"What's that?" said Dinny Pack sharply, getting to his feet.

"I say you fool dese pilgrim wit' dam lie," Louis reiterated flatly. "You don't know not'ing about dem lac."

"Maybe I don't," Pack admitted. "But my partner does if he says he does, and no pea soup's going to call him a liar. Take it back or eat it!"

"Hold on, hold on!" cried Jim Dunleath, springing up.

"I don' tak' not'ing——" Louis began, and Dinny Pack's fist cut the sentence in half.

It cracked against Louis' jaw like a mallet on a plank, but with little more result, though it would have dropped an ordinary man. But Louis was not an ordinary man.

With a tremendous bass bellow he sprang at Pack, and though he took another punch which should have stopped him, it entirely failed to do so. He caught him about the body, and in an instant there was a furious struggle which whirled about the fire, scattering cooking utensils in all directions. They went right through the blaze, stamping it to a red glow and plunging us into partial darkness, and as they fought they cursed pantingly through clenched teeth.

Dunleath tried to part them, but the weight of their locked, twisting bodies brushed him aside. They went down, still locked, rolling over and over like dogs, for neither could pin the other to the ground.

It was Louis who at last came uppermost and reached for Pack's throat. But Jim Dunleath and Mr. Fothergill both caught him and dragged him off. And the former got a twisting grip on him which held him, strong as he was, momentarily powerless.

"Quit it, Louis!" he cried. "No more of this goes, understand."

"He's ponch me on my face!" cried Louis. "Ba-gosh, I bus' heem up for dat!"

"Turn him loose!" Dinny Pack challenged. "I'll bet he don't clinch me again."

But his partner pushed him back, and the others held Louis, and finally they calmed down a little.

"Make it up," Jim Dunleath advised. "You shouldn't have said what you did, Louis. Shake hands and let it go, Pack."

"Well, mebbe I tak' dat back, w'at I say," said Louis. "I shake hands wit' heem if he's lak." But I thought I saw the ghost of a wicked smile in his eyes.

"Suits me, if you say so," said Dinny Pack. "I

never refused to shake with a good man, if he wanted it that way. And I'll own up that you're the strongest man I ever had hold of." He held out his hand.

"You t'ink so," said Louis. "Well, we jus' shake on dat. Catch holt."

He caught Pack's hand. For a moment it looked like an ordinary handshake, and then I saw that it was not. The big Frenchman did not let go. He was putting all his power into his fingers. From wrist to shoulder I saw the sinews and muscles tauten, harden and swell. The veins stood out upon his forehead with the concentration of the grip.

But Pack, I think, had divined his purpose before it was too late. He had shot his hand in, thumb-crotch to thumb-crotch, and before the heaviness of the grip was laid on him he had made a quick step forward, so that the two hands were close beside his hip. And this gave him added power and leverage. Less heavily muscled than Louis, he held him even by superior fibre.

But gradually the Frenchman's vast strength told. I could see Pack's arm quiver a little with the strain which he was now forcing, and Louis knew it, too. He grinned, and suddenly dropped his shoulder six inches. The action brought his

face close to Pack's, which grew white. And then Louis loosed the limp hand and laughed.

"By dam," said he, "you'll be strong man, too, but not so strong lak ol' Louis. I guess mebbe dat mak' us square on dat ponch you hand me, hey?"

Dinny Pack wrung his powerless fingers.

"You're lucky I don't hand you another," he said. "Well, I can take my medicine when I can't help it. Only don't try nothin' like that again."

But Louis laughed as if he regarded it as a huge joke, and filled his pipe.

"All right," he responded, "we be good frien's now, hey?" And turning to Mr. Fothergill, he said: "I guess if you want for pass yourself on dose lac again dat's your biz-ness, an' I don't kick some more. I come wit' you. I guess you don't get along so well wit'out me to cook, yes!"

And so, the trouble having blown over, leaving a clear sky, we rolled up in our blankets, and I for one slept like the proverbial log.

I woke in the morning to see old Ike Toft by a freshly kindled fire, busy preparing breakfast. And while I was wondering hazily why he was doing Louis' work, Dunleath stirred and sat up.

"Hallo!" he said. "What are *you* rustling grub for?"

"Somebody's got to," Toft replied.

"But where's Louis? That's his work."

Toft greased the pan methodically.

"I dunno where he is," he answered. "But it's a cinch he ain't here. And neither is our canoes. Dinny, he's piked off down river to look for 'em!"

CHAPTER XII

FORESTALLED

DUNLEATH shook Mr. Fothergill awake, and at first he quite refused to believe the news. But when he saw that the canoes were gone, and Louis' blankets also, and in fact everything that we had not brought up to the camp, conviction was forced on him, and he swore like the British army in Flanders over a century ago.

But that did not help matters at all. The cold fact was that Louis had set us afoot in a wilderness with very little food and a most inadequate outfit. We had arms and ammunition, because we invariably brought these up from the canoe at night, and so we could scarcely starve, but it was a blue lookout nevertheless. And then there was the mystery of Louis' disappearance. Why had he gone, and why had he taken both canoes?

"The infernal scoudrel!" Mr. Fothergill stormed. "I wouldn't have believed it. The last thing he said was that he would go back with us. I can't understand it—unless he has gone crazy."

"If he went crazy he was mighty quiet about it," said Jim Dunleath. "I don't understand it myself, but I think we may eliminate that theory."

"He sure was quiet," said Toft. "I sleep mighty light—a man does when he gits to be my age, knockin' around the way I have—and I woke once, thinkin' I heard somethin', but I didn't hear no more, and of course she wasn't my camp and a man might have got stirrin' around, and it wouldn't have been none of my business. So I went to sleep again. Then when I got up just before day I didn't see the Frenchman, nor no blankets where he had bedded down. And then I looked around and found the canoes was gone. So I woke up Dinny and he hit off downstream. I guess he'll do some travelin', too. I told him, if he come up with the Frenchman to holler at him once."

"Once?" said Mr. Fothergill inquiringly.

"You think he shouldn't, maybe," said Toft. "Well, o' course it's a matter of opinion, and you got a right to yours. Anyhow, Dinny promised he would."

"Why shouldn't he?" asked Mr. Fothergill. "I don't understand."

"Oh," Toft explained, "I thought you was kickin' at it. Lots of fellers would beef the Frenchman without givin' him a chance to come ashore. That's what I meant. But Dinny'll holler at him once, and then if the pea soup don't come in he'll get him right there."

It was odd to hear the little man with the gentle

voice and the childlike eyes talk in this matter-of-fact way.

"Stealin' a canoe in this man's country," he went on, "ain't no diff'rent from stealin' a horse on the plains. It sets a man afoot. And this is no country to be set afoot in."

"He can't take both canoes far," Jim Dunleath pointed out.

"No, he'll cache one or bust it. Or if he just let it loose there's fast water below here that'd save him the trouble. I sure hope Dinny comes up with him."

But Pack did not return, and after breakfast Toft and I started downstream.

"You see," he said, "there's just a chance that all the Frenchman wants is a start for wherever he's went to. He might cache the canoe somewheres along the bank or tie it up, or just let it float on the chance of it lodging. He'd figger we'd have sense enough to hunt pretty close for it before we'd try to get out overland. Now Dinny, he was out for the Frenchman, and so he wouldn't look for nothing but him. He'll go fast. We can go slower, and look closer."

So we prowled along the bank, looking into eddies and jams of driftwood, and beneath sweepers for some sign of a canoe. And thus, nearly five miles downstream, we came on our big canoe

held by the current against a fallen tree close under the bank. It was imposible to say whether it had drifted in there by itself, or not.

"So, he's taken our canoe," Toft commented. "I thought he would. Well, we may's well git in and keep on down to pick up Dinny. He'll keep hikin', and the further he goes without seein' the Frenchman the madder he'll git and the further he'll go."

Luckily Louis had left a couple of paddles, but it was not till the afternoon that we found Dinny Pack, sitting on the bank smoking. He was wet to the waist, his face was scratched and his clothes torn. It was evident that he had found the going rough.

"You didn't get him, did you?" was his first question. "Nor me," he said as Toft shook his head. "I ain't seen hair nor hide of him. I run into a swamp back there that stopped me. I guess he's made his get-away with our canoe."

"Looks like it," Toft agreed. "I was hopin' you'd come up on him."

"I did all I could," Pack responded. "Them last few miles was pretty rough, and I had to keep where I could see the river."

It was late in the afternoon when we reached camp, and nothing more could be done that day. But we had a canoe which would hold all five

of us, and it was now possible to go back to Ahtikamag. We could get along quite well without Louis.

But the more I considered his action, the less I could understand it. He had entered emphatic objection to going back to the lakes. But that seemed due principally to his loyalty to Ballou and to resentment of doubts of the latter's knowledge of the country. And he wanted to get home to the Carcajou. But would that drive him to the point of stealing a canoe to accomplish it? I milled these things over in my mind, without any result. The more I thought, the more puzzled I became.

However, with renewed hopes of finding the fur cache we all brightened up a little. If we found the cache we could intercept Ballou and the others on their way back from their prospecting.

"It will be a horse on old Tom, if we do find anything," said Mr. Fothergill. "It's one on him, anyway, about the lake. I'll rub that into him when I see him. If we find the furs we'll need all the canoes. I wish I knew just where he has gone."

"Kill your meat before you skin it," Pack advised.

"I'm an optimist," said Mr. Fothergill.

"I guided a geologist once," said Dinny gravely, so that I was not sure whether he was joking or not, "but an optimist is a new one on me."

"An optimist," Mr. Fothergill explained, "is a man who looks on the bright side and hopes for the best."

"I know that kind," said Dinny. "They hope the game's square, and they don't watch the dealer. The system is wrong. In most things you want to figger the chances is agin' you. Then you organize yourself to beat 'em."

"Right!" said Dunleath.

"There's no sense in taking a gloomy view of anything," Mr. Fothergill stated. "'Trust in God and keep your powder dry.' But keep hoping. That's my motto."

"All right to keep a-hoping if you keep a-humping," Pack agreed. "Plain hope never got a man anywhere he wanted to go. What I say is that jails is full of these here optimists that hoped they wouldn't be caught and was careless. What's the other end of the bettin'? What's a feller that don't look on the shiny side?"

"He's a pessimist."

"Then that's me," said Dinny. "I copper my bets. I play 'em to lose, and when I make a winnin' it's a joyful surprise. I figger there's a hoodoo on me. At the top of a bad bit of water I say to myself: 'Dinny, here's where you get dumped, and chances is you drown. You know you ain't lived right, so you better be plumb care-

ful.' So I get through all right. I ain't never been sick in my life, but I figger my luck won't last. I rap on wood, and I cross my fingers, and I bless myself when I sneeze, and I always buy the best ammynition there is. I organize myself on a losin' basis and I get along. Now about this here cache, I figger we ain't got a chance in the world to find her. And so I'll bet we do!"

We all laughed at this contradictory philosophy.

"There's not so much difference between us, after all," said Mr. Fothergill. "But if we find the furs Ballou will want to crawl into a hole. And wait till I tell him about that rascally Frenchman. He'll be as indignant as we are. When we get back to the Carcajou I'll have the dog arrested!"

Old Ike Toft had said nothing. Now he removed his pipe and asked:

"What makes you think he's gone back to the Carcajou?"

Mr. Fothergill stared at him.

"Of course he has. He didn't want to go back to the lakes. That was what started the row."

"Why didn't he want to go back?"

"Principally, I think, because what you said reflected on Ballou's knowledge of the country."

"You don't know just where this Ballou has gone?"

"No."

"My tumtum is," said Toft, "that the Frenchman's gone to find him."

"Why do you think that?" Dunleath asked quickly.

"I dunno's I can tell you. I just think it. I know he made a strong play about goin' home; but then he made a stronger one about not wantin' to go back to the lakes. That might have been because he didn't want you to go back there."

"But why on earth shouldn't he want us to?" asked Mr. Fothergill. "The only reason I can think of is that it might prove Ballou's mistake."

"May be something in that. Anyway, I think he's gone to join them tillikums of his, wherever they are. Maybe they've heard of some good placer ground somewheres. and the Frenchman was sore at not bein' in it, and bein' sent back with you. Did he kick at comin' with you when your outfit split up?"

"He seemed sulky about something," Dunleath replied thoughtfully.

"Then I'll bet that's it."

"Why, Ballou himself was coming with us up to the last moment," said Mr. Fothergill. "He took no stock in this prospecting—told me so himself. He went principally because he knew the country better than the others, and they wanted him."

"If he don't know it better than he knew them

lakes," said Dinny Pack, "they ain't got much of a guide."

But Mr. Fothergill, while admitting that Tom Ballou might have made a mistake for once, would hear nothing in disparagement of his general knowledge. He got quite warm about it, and Dinny seeing this, winked solemnly at me and said no more.

Now, our big canoe, as I think I have said, was a four-fathom bark; and with five paddles to drive it, it cut the water like a launch. We soon made the lake of islands, and Toft turned in behind three of the latter which lay close to the western shore. At first sight the shore line seemed to be unbroken; but presently we opened a bay which seemed to run far inland. At the end of the bay was a channel, marshy on either hand, with a slow current.

"Just opposite them islands," said Toft, "was where Nitche had his cache that was lifted. If you're right he took 'em up this channel and cached 'em on Ahtikamag while we was hellin' along the other lakes, through Shingoos and into the river again. He sure must have worked to do it."

The channel continued for about three miles, as nearly as I could judge. It expanded, and we came upon a small lake. Passing through this, a beautiful sheet of water opened before us.

"This is Ahtikamag," said Toft, "the lower end

of it. It's a good twenty miles between it and Shingoos, where you were, and there's a sort of ridge of hills between, so you couldn't see it. Not many people come to this. I ain't been here myself for nigh twenty years."

"You seem to remember it pretty well," said Jim.

"I remember most places where I've been. And then we combed this country pretty close, lookin' for Nitche's cache. I come back afterward and looked."

Lake Ahtikamag was as large if not larger than Shingoos, and, as in the case of the latter, there were a few islands, of varying sizes, principally at the lower end.

We had camped overnight at the first small lake, and we entered Ahtikamag on a hazy morning. There was not a breath of air. Shadows lay in the water and the shore lines were reflected softly. Except for the calling of a loon and the dip of our paddles the silence was utter. The low hills were clad in faint blue and purple lights, less than color, impalpable, mysterious, resembling the thin blue-gray of smoke.

"Looks like a weather-breeder to me," said Toft. "Just as like as not to blow. This lake can raise a dirty sea when she likes."

As we came near our destination a faint murmur became audible.

"That's the crick," said Toft. "She runs fast out of a cañon. That's her a-growlin'. We can paddle up it for a ways. Then it shallows and gets too fast."

The creek entered the lake in the shelter of a narrow, wooded point. The entrance was deep, and the current strong, swirling along by cutbanks. Digging hard we worked our way upstream. We rounded a sharp turn, and Pack in the bow exclaimed sharply. I looked up. There, on a shingly little strip of beach beneath a steep bank, half a dozen canoes were turned bottoms up!

"By George!" cried Mr. Fothergill. "Somebody's before us."

And old Toft grunted.

"I called her pretty near right," said he. "That there littlest canoe belongs to me and Dinny. It's the one the Frenchman got away with."

"And," I said, "those others—all but one—are our canoes, too. I'd know them anywhere!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE CACHE

THERE was absolutely no doubt about it. And therefore it was clear that Ballou and the others had not gone prospecting at all. Their camp was just visible through the trees, a hundred yards or so inland. There was a lean-to, and a smoldering fire with a faint curl of smoke. But nobody was in sight.

"Well," said Jim Dunleath, "what do you think, Wally? Do you see anything resembling a fine, large, double-cross?"

Mr. Fothergill wagged his head helplessly, as if the irresistible conclusion were entirely too much for him.

"Tom Ballou!" he said. "Old Tom Ballou, of all men!"

"'Brutus is an honorable man. So are they all, all honorable men.'"

"There may be some explanation."

"The explanation is very simple, and you know it as well as I do. Ballou deliberately misled us. He took us to a place roughly corresponding to the description we had, and allowed us to hunt until

we grew discouraged. He hurried things up by a pretended strike of the men. This prospecting yarn was all bunk. As soon as our backs were turned, Ballou and our precious ex-employees came here. Louis was to herd us along, and that was at the bottom of his grouch. He didn't like the job, because he was afraid they would hold out on him. Of course, when he knew we were coming back to the real Ahtikamag he had to get back ahead of us to warn Ballou. I don't know why he didn't destroy our canoe, but I suppose he thought we wouldn't find it as soon as we did. Well, that's how it stands. Ballou and the lot of them are in this to get the furs themselves. What are we going to do about it?"

Mr. Fothergill swore. It was hard medicine, after all his eulogies of Ballou. But for my part I was scarcely less surprised. In all the time I had known old Tom I had never heard of his doing a dishonest act. He was the last man I should have suspected of deliberate treachery. But here was proof.

"Well," said Dinny Pack, "if you're goin' to chaw the rag about it much, I'd do it some other place. I don't know this bunch, but if they was to come back and find us here, I b'lieve there'd be the makin's of trouble. We know they're here, and they don't know we are. We got it on them

that much. If it was me I'd pull out till I figgered out the best play."

"That's right," Toft agreed. "I guess they're up the creek lookin' for the cache. It's gettin' on time for 'em to come back to eat."

"Then we'll go," Dunleath decided.

We dropped downstream, and keeping in close to shore, landed a mile or more below the creek. There we ate lunch. While we ate we discussed the situation, but we did not get very far ahead.

To begin with, Ballou and his men outnumbered us. And then there was the strange canoe. Where had that come from? Anyway it meant a couple more men. They were on the ground, in possession. Most of the canoes were theirs by right of purchase. As to the cache, though we had Nitche McNab's letter, of course that constituted no ownership that they would recognize. If they found the cache they would keep its contents. But had they found it?

"Not likely," said Toft. "Even if they do, the furs may not be any good. And if they ain't, it might not be worth while hornin' in on that crowd at all. My tumtum would be to go slow on this till you know where you're at. If we was to strike back to where we could look down into the creek bottom at the foot of the cañon we might find out something."

The suggestion was good. Toft led the way inland through heavy timber. It was a steady climb at first, but when we turned in the direction of the creek the going was better.

"Gettin' near to it now," said Toft. "We ought to be about opposite the foot of the cañon. Go careful when you git close. A man shows up ag'in' a skyline."

We looked down into a deep, wooded gorge. Below us the lips of the cañon spat a torrent of swirling water which, spreading, brawled noisily in a boulder-strewn course of frosted silver. On our side the drop was abrupt, rocky, gray with miniature slides of shale and small stuff. But across the creek the slope was easier, and covered with a growth of fir and spruce.

"I guess that's your hawk's nest," said Toft. "I seem to remember it now."

It surmounted the broken top of a giant fir nearly opposite us. It was by far the largest nest that I had ever seen, a mass of weather-beaten sticks, the size of half a hogshead. Though the treetop was broken, the tree itself was living. Perhaps a century had gone by since the first pair of broad-winged fishers of the air had chosen that broken top for a nesting place and laid their first foundation timbers, wedging them cunningly with beak and claw. And since that time others had

followed, adding to the structure as seemed good to them. Now the nest was deserted. No doubt the birds of that season had flown. But strewn on the nest and caught in the bushy treetop were the whitened vertebræ of the fish which had nourished them.

"And there is the red rock!" I cried in excitement.

It lay downhill from the tree, a great boulder, the only one on the hillside visible from our position. How it had come there was a mystery. Perhaps it was a solitary relic of a day when a great ice sheet overlay and overrode the land. But at any rate there it was, just as it had been when Nitche McNab and his henchman had packed in their spoil. And from it a line, like a survey line, had been cut through the undergrowth, no doubt to allow Ballou to sight along the mark for the cache.

Following this line with the eye to our own side of the creek, we could see where they had been working, moving a mass of rubble and slide stuff; and their tools lay scattered about as they had dropped them to take their nooning.

"Knocked off for grub and ain't come back yet," said Dinny Pack. "They've stripped off quite a bunch of stuff."

"Keep down," said Toft. "They're comin' back now."

They came along close to the creek, Ballou first, walking by himself, then Hayes and McGregor, and the rest of the crew strung out anyhow. But with them were two men whom I did not know.

"By gosh," whispered Dinny Pack, "look-a there, Ike!"

"I see 'em," said Toft. "Was them two men in your outfit—I mean the big, black-complected feller and the older one with the whiskers, and the handkerchief round his neck?"

"No, they're strangers to us," Dunleath replied.

"They make durn good strangers, too," Pack growled. "But you ought to know 'em, Bob. That big feller is Charles Simmons—Nootka Charlie that got fresh with your sister—and the old pelican is Siwash George Collins. Both squaw men—more or less—and both bad actors. Me and Ike know 'em, don't we, Ike?"

"Some," Toft agreed briefly. "Which is this here Ballou?"

I told him and pointed out the others. They picked up the tools and attacked the base of the hill with an energy that told of personal interest. Because they were almost directly below us we could not see what progress they were making, but there was no doubt that they were working hard.

"Dig, ye gophers!" muttered Dinny. "I always did admire to watch other fellers work!" And quite unconsciously he began to boss them profanely, like a two-fisted Connemara foreman of a construction gang, only he did it under his breath.

We lay and watched them sweating and toiling among the hot rocks. It was evident that, so far, they had found nothing, but from their energy it seemed that they believed themselves on the right track. Suddenly one of the men shouted, and the others clustered around him, throwing away the dirt and rubble from one spot. Then Louis Beef sprang in close under the rocks and began to throw out small boulders the size of a man's head, as if they had been cushions. We heard him yell triumphantly.

"I guess they got her," said Toft calmly.

"Looks like it," Dunleath agreed ruefully.

Ballou went out of sight, and Hayes followed him closely. One by one the others disappeared.

"That's her, sure," said Dinny. "Nitche McNab's old cache that was all same fairy tale! Well, maybe there ain't a darn thing in her after all."

But in a minute a man came out with a bale on his shoulder, and another and another similarly laden, and still they kept coming, and the first went back for more. On his last trip Louis brought out a small keg.

"Them's the furs," said Toft. "I wish I had a dollar for every one of them things I've packed."

They dumped the bales on the ground, and Ballou ripped one open with his knife, while the others crowded closely around him. We watched breathlessly. Now it was to be known whether the contents of the cache were valuable or worthless.

Ballou had a skin in his hands. It looked like the pelt of a fox, and of a black fox at that. The men pressed in and helped themselves to other skins, holding them up, turning them to the light, blowing up the nap of the fur, pulling at it to test its condition.

And then somebody yipped shrilly like a coyote. Another jumped into a few quick dance steps and struck Louis a tremendous blow between the shoulders. Louis caught up the keg, and holding it tilted to his mouth made believe to drink from it. The pantomime was more convincing than words. The furs were still good.

They went into bale after bale, apparently with like result, and then they sat down and the smoke of their pipes rose blue above them. Louis sat on the keg, his legs curled around it, and roared forth an old French chanson, beating a thunderous accompaniment on its sides with his great hands.

"What's in the keg?" I asked Dinny.

"Rum or high wines, I guess. May be brandy.

Nitche must have lifted it from one of the posts. And lyin' there twenty years! She'll have a kick like mules." His tongue slid out a little and caressed his lips furtively. "It's six months and better," he said plaintively, "since I had a drink."

"You had enough then to do you six years," his partner returned unfeelingly.

But the inaction of the group below us did not last long. They shouldered a load each and started down the creek.

"Packin' them down to camp," said Toft. "I judge there's about four canoe loads there. Well, they'll have 'em all down by night, and like as not they'll pull out in the morning."

"Unless they're stopped," said Jim Dunleath.

"How was you thinkin' of stoppin' them?" Toft inquired mildly.

"There's only one way," Mr. Fothergill put in. "We'll hold them up, get the drop on them, make them put up their hands."

"Sounds all right," said Toft, "only it ain't always so easy to hold up a big bunch like that. What would you do if they didn't obey orders—when you told 'em to sky their claws?"

"Well"—Mr. Fothergill hesitated—"of course I wouldn't like to shoot a man. It wouldn't do—wouldn't do at all. There would be a devil of a row about it. But it won't be necessary to shoot.

They woudn't dare refuse, I'm quite positive of that. We can bluff them."

"That system is no good," said Toft. "You never want to start out to hold up nobody with the idee that you're runnin' a sandy. You may show it's a bluff; or you may be slow decidin' what to do if your hand's called. And while you're decidin' you get killed. You want to go in with your mind made up cold to plug any man that don't do what he's told and do it quick. With a bunch like this here, there's always liable to be one man that'll take a chance. That makes a chance for somebody else, and then she's gen'ral. I don't know this crowd of yours, but I know Nootka and his partner, and I'm tellin' you that holdin' them up ain't no cinch."

"That's right," Dinny affirmed. "We know them two pelicans, and a couple of your crowd is bad-lookin' old-timers. If you want to make it a hold-up, me and Ike's agreeable. Only it's got to be understood that if we fill our hands we play 'em for all that's in 'em. How are they fixed for guns?"

"Each of our men had a rifle," Dunleath replied, "and I think one or two have six-shooters. Hayes has—always wears it."

"Bad old rooster, is he?"

"I don't know. As for myself I never shot any-

body or at anybody, and I don't want to. I don't know whether I'm afraid or not. Perhaps I am. There are nine of them and only four of us."

"Five," I amended.

"I'm not counting you, Bob."

"Why not?" I demanded indignantly. "I can shoot a whole lot better than you can."

"Very true. But I'm responsible for your safety, and you won't be in any hold-up if I can help it. I promised your folks to look after you."

"I can look after myself," I growled. "I suppose that's some of Peggy's foolishness. She thinks I'm a kid."

"So you are," Dinny Pack put in. "What your sister says goes."

"Mind your own business!" I snapped. "Where do you get action in this, anyway?"

He grinned at me.

"Don't get hostile for a minute, kid. There'll likely be plenty of trouble to go all around. Well, I dunno's I'm hankerin' after no hold-up deals myself. I wisht I could work out some other way."

Now with his words, an idea suddenly popped from nowhere into my head; but I kept it to myself, partly because I was used to doing my own thinking and partly because I was angry with both Dunleath and Pack. They thought I was a kid, did they? Well, I would show them!

CHAPTER XIV

I PLAY A LONE HAND

SINCE there was nothing to be gained by remaining longer we went back to the shore and our canoe. By that time the afternoon was far gone. The low sun hid itself behind threatening clouds, and a rising wind, coldly edged, began to strain through the treetops. The surface of the lake darkened and soon began to run in little, choppy, white-topped waves. Toft's prediction of a blow seemed to be coming true.

With the darkness we made a fire and had a hot meal. Afterward Toft told us more of Nitche McNab.

"He was too durn cute to camp on that creek when he was shifting the furs," he said. "He must have worked day and night till he got it done, and I guess it would take him about a dozen trips. The only place he built a fire was at the cache he was lifting. It fooled us all. We combed that country till the weasels got to know us. After the others had quit I sorter nanitched round by myself for a while. I figgered Nitche or some of 'em might come back, and I was lookin' for 'em,

'specially for Nitche. There was a thousand dollars on his scalp. It wasn't that so much, but I'd got it straight that it was him killed a tillikum of mine. So I was lookin' for him. Yes, I prospected this country pretty gen'ral. That's how I come to this here creek. I went up her to the cañon, and I thought I saw sign of a trail, but I couldn't make sure. I was within ten feet of that cache, and I didn't know it. That's nigh twenty years ago. Funny I should be here now, ain't it?"

While it was quite early I spread my blankets a little distance from the fire, behind a clump of black birch where I was in the shadow. After a while the men drew closer together. Toft seemed to be explaining something by means of a diagram which he drew on the ground with a stick. Finally I caught my own name.

"We'll leave him to keep camp," said Pack.

I grinned to myself in the shadow. Keep camp! Nothing was further from my thoughts. I waited till they had turned in, and were sleeping, and then I rolled softly out of my blankets and made my way carefully to the canoe. From it I took a coil of light line; and then I stole cautiously along the shore toward the creek.

Now the idea which had come to me, and which I considered exceptionally brilliant, was to steal

Ballou's canoes. And because Dunleath and Pack had chosen to treat me as a child I would accomplish it alone. As I think it over now, I can see that the plan was not only foolhardy but foolish; but at the time I considered it a heaven-born conception.

I followed the shore until I came to the creek, and it was not by any means a stroll on a beach. Most of the way the water lapped right up on the rocks, and there was brush and fallen trees. However, by taking my time and going carefully I got along very well, and at last I could see the distant glimmer of a fire and hear the sound of voices.

This rather upset my calculations, for I had thought they would all be asleep. But I heard a snatch of song and loud laughter, and I thought of the keg of rum, or whatever was in it. No doubt they were celebrating their luck. Well, the more noise they made, the less they would hear. And so I went ahead very cautiously.

Now I do not want to give the impression that I was a young Leatherstocking, or any wonder in the woods. I had merely learned, by still-hunting, to move quietly and feel the ground for crackling sticks and so on, before I put my weight on it. Also I had learned infinite patience. This was a new kind of still-hunting, and it sent delicious thrills up and down my spine and in the roots

of my hair. This was a real adventure, such as I had read of and longed for, and it was all my own. I relished it with the keen zest of boyhood which invariably overlooks and minimizes difficulty and danger, because life runs then so readily and strongly.

Finally I came to the bank above the little shingly beach where the canoes lay. I slid down, and using great care to avoid noise, turned them over. Then I eased them inch by inch into the water, fearful of the grate of stones on their bottoms, though the wind was roaring through the trees. When they all lay with their noses to the beach I took the coil of light line and made the bow of one fast to the stern of the next, so that they would ride in a string behind me when I got into the leading one. I shoved them out so that they rode in deep water. But instead of getting in and going as I should have done, I hesitated.

Now that I had the canoes—or as good as had them—I wanted to hear what the fur thieves were talking about. They thought they had everything their own way. It would be rich to hear them. I only regretted that I could not be there when they missed the canoes. Finally this foolish desire got the better of prudence; and I made the leading

canoe fast, stowed my rifle in it carefully, and crawled up the bank and toward the fire.

Many writers who describe the camp fire speak of the "circle of light" cast by it. You would think there was a definite ring, beyond which nothing was visible. And of course, if you sit facing a fire you cannot see very far or very much. But if you turn your back to it you can distinguish a man's face or a blazed tree for a surprising distance. Knowing this, I took no chances. They had a big fire, and I kept close to the ground, moving in the shadows, and brought up in a little hollow behind a bush where I could both see and hear.

The first thing I saw was that there was a woman in camp. She was a squaw, and she sat a little apart from the rest, mending gloves or moccasins by the firelight. I could not tell much about her, except that she looked like a young woman, and no doubt she belonged to Nootka Charlie or Siwash George. Nor did I derive any satisfaction from the talk I overheard. It had nothing to do with the furs or with their plans. They were telling stories, principally, and these were either lewd or blasphemous, and sometimes both. I don't know whether the woman understood them or not, and nobody seemed to care. There was no profit in listening to that sort of thing, and I should have gone anyway. But just

then somebody proposed another drink, and Conover discovered that the water bucket was empty.

"I can't down this hooch straight!" he complained.

"Who was your nigger last year?" said McGregor. "Get water yourself, if you want it."

That settled my listening. I slid back into the shadows and made for the canoes. I cast off with hands that fumbled with eager hurry, jumped into the leading craft and shoved off into deep water.

In an instant the current took the bow and whirled it out and around. I paddled hard, striving to straighten out my unwieldy string, and as I did so, I heard the clank of the bucket bale as Conover came down to the landing. The gravel grated beneath his feet, and then his startled oath burst like shrapnel.

"Canoes is gone!" he yelled. And an instant after: "I see them. Come on, boys, get a move on! Bring my gun."

Sudden uproar in the camp answered him. I paddled as quietly as I could, merely keeping the canoe straight and letting the current do the rest. It was taking me lakeward rapidly. I did not know whether Conover had really seen me or not, but no accurate shooting was possible in that darkness. I was willing to take a chance on that.

In the excitement of the moment I did not consider the possibility of being hit.

The next moment I did consider it, for a slender shaft of fire lanced the night, and a bullet whined behind me and, deflected by some branch on the farther side of the creek, it keyholed, and wailed away into the darkness in a high-pitched note like some ghostly violin.

I ducked promptly and automatically, though by that time the bullet was far past me. I squatted low in the canoe, but I kept my paddle going. Another bit of lead tore above my head, and a third hit the water in front of me. The man behind the gun was evidently spraying the channel with lead on general principles.

The lake loomed in front of me. I threw every ounce of power into my paddle to gain it; because when I emerged from the background of the creek's bank, although the night was as dark as a cord of black cats, my string of canoes would probably be visible. And of course the men would make for the mouth of the creek on that chance.

Suddenly my paddle jarred and was almost torn from my hand. Bullets sang all around me, spatted and ricocheted on the water, buzzed through the air about my head. Half a dozen rifles blended in a rattling fire. Apparently they were all unhooking their guns straight downstream in the hope

of hitting any one who might be there. I dropped flat in the canoe and waited till the fusillade ceased.

My paddle blade had been split, but I had a second paddle in the canoe, and working furiously, I emerged from the creek to the lake. In spite of the wind it was calm enough there because the long, narrow point sheltered the creek's mouth. But on the other side of the point I could hear the waves swashing against the shingle, and the trees were bending with the gale.

I drove my heavy string straight out, because there was nothing else for it. I had to get clear of the land before I was seen, wind or no wind; and I had made perhaps more than a hundred yards from the creek's mouth when I heard a yell behind.

After that one yell they wasted no time in hailing, but began to shoot. They could not have seen me more than dimly, and of course they could not see their rifle sights at all. Their shooting was entirely guess as to elevation. Nevertheless it was close enough to be unpleasant. Several times I heard bullets strike the canoes behind me. They seemed to buzz all around. But this time, with no current to assist me, I had to keep paddling to get out of range as soon as possible. I think they lost sight of me almost immediately. At any rate their bullets began to go wide, and

they stopped firing as the nose of my canoe lifted to the first surges which came around the point.

Intent on getting out of shot, I was out of shelter before I knew it. Then for the first time I realized the strength of the wind. It ramped down on me like a stampede, took my string of canoes and blew them to leeward like the tail of a kite, and they dragged me after them. In fact, it was only the drift of the light canoes that enabled me to keep head to wind at all. I was traveling stern first, and all my efforts with the paddle barely sufficed to hold the bow on.

At first the sea was not bad. It was short and choppy, and the canoes jumped and tugged; but as we drifted farther it rose alarmingly, in crested rollers which I did not like at all. I had to shift my weight for'ard of amidships to keep the bow to the wind, for the gale took it and flung it sideways, and I had all I could do to drag it back with the paddle. All the time I was being swept out and down the lake, and the sea got worse. Of course, I had intended to bring the canoes triumphantly into shore by our camp, but I soon saw that I could do nothing of the sort, even with one canoe, let alone the lot. I was quite helpless so far as directing my course was concerned. All I could do was to drift, and try to do that right side up.

I began to tire with the continued exertion. I was a strong boy, but after all I was only a boy with only a boy's endurance. My arms began to weaken with the dig and drag of the paddle. Once the canoe swung and almost broached, and a wave broke inboard, drenching me. I realized that it was impossible to continue head to wind, and the only thing to do was to turn and run before it. This involved abandoning the other canoes, and no doubt they would drive down on one another in the seas and smash like eggshells. However, I could not help that. I should be lucky if I could slash through the rope which made me fast, without a capsize.

But just then something happened. Instead of the canoes blowing out behind me, they were swinging around tail first and dragging me with them. And then I saw what caused it. The rear canoe of the string was waterlogged. Probably it had been struck by bullets and filled gradually. Being waterlogged, it did not drift as fast as the others, which blew past it, and pivoting on it were turning stern first to the seas. My canoe which had been first would by this reversal of things be last.

For a moment we were broadside on, rolling and tumbling in the trough, jamming together frightfully. White water creamed up yeastily in the darkness, broke and flung its sprayheads at me. I

was hit in the teeth by the top of a wave and almost choked. For a moment I thought I was certainly capsized, but I found myself afloat, digging hard with my paddle, not to keep bow on, but to turn stern to. And then by sheer luck the canoes swung past, straightened out with a succession of jerks, and there I rode to an accidental sea anchor.

With the change I shifted my weight to the other end and went to bailing, for I had shipped considerable water. I got the most of it out and lay down with my back against a thwart. The canoe tossed and pitched, but the motion was fore and aft, and in that way a canoe will stand almost anything. All the time I was drifting down the lake, and pretty well in the middle of it as nearly as I could judge. It began to rain, in slashing squalls that blotted out the dim shore line, but as I was thoroughly soaked already, that made little difference. The wind searched my wet clothes, with a chill like November. By contrast the water overside seemed almost warm.

After a while the sky cleared partially, and a few stars showed through the driving clouds. But though I had hopes that the rain would have killed the wind, it had not done so. If anything, it blew stiffer than ever.

Suddenly, in the ceaseless surge and boil of

water my ear caught a new note. To starboard rose a black bulk against which the waves broke solidly. It was one of the small, rocky islands, and I was being driven past it within a few yards. Grabbing my paddle I worked frantically, but the black shore slid by, and I could see the end of it and the gouts of the tossing waters beyond. And so I bent what was left of the line around a thwart, took the other end in a loop over my arm and jumped in.

Of course I knew that I could get ashore myself, but I was afraid that the wet line might foul or snarl. Luckily it did neither, and before it was all paid out I got my feet on bottom. It was round, slippery boulders, and the waves threw me off my first footing. But I got ashore just at the lower end of the little island, and snubbed my drifting flotilla so that it swung in with the send of the seas under the lee. Then I emptied out the water they had shipped and drew them up high and dry out of harm's way. And thus, so far, I considered that honors were even. For if Ballou had the furs we had the canoes, without which he could not move his plunder.

CHAPTER XV

BALLOU'S EXPLANATION

HOWEVER, I was far too cold and miserable to indulge in self-congratulation. I was shivering like a wet puppy, and my first necessity was warmth. There was plenty of dry wood, and I found a dead cedar and shredded bark from it. I had matches in two empty rifle shells shoved hard together, a contrivance for which I had to thank Ballou. This makes a water-tight joint, just as good as any of the patent match safes that are sold nowadays. I had left my coat in the canoe when I had jumped overboard and the safe in its pocket, but I have left the thing in water for an hour and still had dry matches. Anyway, the first match I struck, after I had found a dry stone to scratch it on, caught, and soon I had a fine fire, before which I revolved like a roast on a spit, my water-shriveled skin sucking in the grateful warmth.

I had built my fire close under a slightly overhanging wall of rock five or six feet high which served as a reflector. As soon as I lost my first chill I stripped and hung my clothes on sticks to

dry, squatting on my hunkers like a young cave man in the space between fire and rock, where I was comparatively comfortable by shifting about now and then. When my clothes had pretty well dried I put them on, though they were steaming a little, leaned back against the rock and slept.

I suppose if I did that now I should wake up with a selection of chills and threatened pneumonia. But when I woke in the gray of dawn I was merely very cold and stiff, and I rebuilt my fire and warmed up again. The wind had blown itself out and the lake was running in blue ripples in the morning light. The east flushed with rose, and then orange, and the sun came up. I basked in its rays against the rock.

But basking—on an empty stomach—is no occupation for a boy. I had no food, and I wanted breakfast. And so I went up on the island to spy out the land.

It was a small island, not more than four acres or so in area, and I recognized it as one we had passed at a distance on our way up the lake. Farther down was a much larger one. My drift had been about five miles, as nearly as I could judge. Along the distant shores there was neither smoke nor sign of life.

But in the matter of food, luck was with me, for I flushed a spruce partridge or fool hen, as

we called them. The slow bird took a limb a few feet above my head and sat there blinking at me stupidly. I got her with the second club I threw, and broiled her over the coals on a green, forked stick. It was a poor meal, but a great deal better than none at all. And when I had cleaned up that fool bird to little bare bones I went up on the island to a place where I could see the shore and sat down with my back against a tree to line things up.

In broad daylight my adventure did not look nearly as brilliant as when the idea first struck me. Like most grandstand plays it did not accomplish much. I had the canoes, but I had lost my friends. Though Ballou had lost the canoes he still had the furs, and we were further than ever from getting them, since he must now know that we were in the vicinity.

It was certain that with the first light the fur thieves would go down the lake, knowing that it would have been impossible for whoever took the canoes to paddle the other way against that wind. They would be searching the shores and watching the lake. They ran a very good chance of finding my outfit, unless the latter had heard the shooting and, warned by it, had effectually cached themselves. It would never do for me to go paddling out on the lake in daylight, because I should be seen,

and if I landed anywhere, I would likely be captured if I was not shot. And so I could see nothing for it but to stay where I was until night.

That was a very long day. I found no more fool hens, and not even a rabbit, though I combed the island fine; and when I got into the smallest canoe at night my stomach felt like a slack drumhead.

I paddled up the lake slowly, looking for the wink of a fire, but saw none. The shores stretched black and grim and lonely mile on mile. Now and then a fish jumped, but save for that and the faint dip and drip of my paddle there was no sound on land or water. For the first time that I remember, this night stillness and loneliness got on my nerves. It seemed to threaten. And it was not so much the loneliness, for I was sure that there were a dozen human beings within as many miles. The sensation was more as if something impended, as if the darkness spied on me with unfriendly eyes. Perhaps my empty stomach was mainly responsible. But as I drew near the shore I was as jumpy as a wild animal on a strange range.

My only hope of finding my outfit in the night was to see their fire. Otherwise I could do no more than guess at the place where I had left them, and I was pretty sure that they were no

longer there. Finally after coasting along the shore and seeing nothing I made up my mind to land, cache my canoe, and wait for daylight. Then, if I prospected carefully, I might find something. And anyway I could kill something to eat.

I spent the night miserably without a fire, because I wished to leave no trace of my landing; and with the light, I carried the canoe inland and cached it in thick brush where it could not be found save by accident. Then I was foot-loose and I turned my attention to the food problem.

There were plenty of ruffed grouse rustling their own breakfasts, but they were more canny than the fool hens; and though they treed and perked their heads at me I could not kill them with clubs or rocks because they flew whenever I got into good position, and I was afraid to shoot lest the sound betray me. But finally luck came my way. Good fortune in this case took the form of a dignified old-man porcupine, ambling along serenely, indifferent to the rest of creation. When I had killed him I skinned him out of his prickly armor, and, gathering the dryest wood I could find so as to make a smokeless blaze, cooked him as well as I could and ate nearly half of him. Having eaten all the straight porky I could hold, I searched for and finally found the spot where we had camped, but as I had thought, there was nobody

there, and no message. However, I had little doubt that they had gone toward the lower end of the lake, and accordingly I set out to find them.

I prowled along carefully, keeping near the shore, my eyes peeled for any sign of friend or foe. Going thus cautiously, I nearly scared the life out of a young black bear which was rooting like a pig beside a decayed stump. He scuttled out of sight as fast as he could go, leaving me grinning at his hurry and thinking how much lead he would have got in his system if I had not been afraid to shoot. And so I covered four or five miles without the least sign of man. But just as I emerged from a patch of timber and got well into a little glade perhaps a couple of hundred yards across, three men emerged for the farther side. I recognized them, to my consternation. They were old Hayes, Peter the breed, and Nootka Charlie.

We saw each other at the same moment, and halted. But old Hayes waved his hand to me in the friendliest way.

"Hallo, Bob!" he called and began to walk forward.

"Hallo!" I returned, and began to walk backward.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "I want to see you. It's all right. You needn't be scared of me, boy."

"Who's scared of you?" I retorted valiantly, but backing all the time.

Nootka Charlie twitched his rifle upward.

"You, kid, stay where you are!" he commanded.

"All right," I answered, and stopped. But as he lowered the weapon I wheeled, took two jumps to the right, swerved to the left like a snipe in a gale, and plunged into the bushes with a bullet ripping the twigs six inches from my cheek.

Perhaps the buzz of it in my ear rattled me. At any rate I tripped and pitched head first into the butt of a ten-inch spruce, so that I saw a bunch of assorted stars.

I must have been knocked out for a minute. I came out of the haze slowly, with the sound of Hayes' voice as if far off.

"By——" he said, "you've killed him!"

"Why didn't he stand, then?" asked a strange voice querulously. Somebody rolled me over. "Never touched him," the voice continued. "He's just hit his head on something. He'll be all right in a minute."

I opened my eyes and sat up.

"Feelin' better, Bob?" Hayes asked solicitously. "That's good. What did you run for?"

"What did he shoot at me for?"

"Why, he didn't shoot *at* you," Hayes returned. "This here is Nootka Charlie, Bob. You don't want to have no hard feelin's. It was just a fool joke of his. That was all, wasn't it, Charlie?"

"Sure!" the other confirmed. "I wouldn't hurt you, kid, not for a million dollars. I just banged into the air for hellery when you started to run. Shake, and let's be friends."

I think he knew who I was, and remembered his experience at our house with Dinny Pack. But he said nothing about that, no doubt thinking I did not remember him; and naturally I said nothing either. We shook hands, and he helped me to my feet.

"Well now, I'm durn glad to run into you, Bob," said Hayes. "Where's the rest of your outfit? Where's Dunleath and Fothergill?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully.

"You don't! How's that? They must be around here somewheres."

"We got separated. I don't know where they are."

"Did you get separated before they took our canoes, or after?"

"Before," I replied. "I haven't seen them since." I was glad he put it in that way.

"And you don't know where the canoes are?"

"No," I lied. "They wouldn't let me in on what they were going to do that night. I don't know where they are and I haven't seen them since. If they took the canoes in that wind they'd be blown down the lake. I was just looking for

them." Feeling that this explanation was rather bald I elaborated artistically. "You see they wouldn't let me in on it because I was a kid. They make me tired. They left me on the shore, and they were going to pick me up when they got the canoes. They didn't do it, and I haven't had any grub since, except a fool hen and a porky."

"Well, we'll fix that grub proposition as soon as we get to camp," he said. "There's been a mistake all round. There wasn't no call for them to take the canoes, though the way it must have looked to them, I dunno's I blame them much. That Frenchman's a fool. It's him that's to blame for the whole thing. I told Tom at the time, when Louis showed up, that one of us had better take a canoe and go down river to find you. But he said you'd know him better than to think he'd do anything that wasn't right."

I stared at him in amazement.

"Right!" I exclaimed. "Do you call it right to put up a prospecting bluff and then come back to steal our furs?"

"There!" he said. "That's just what I was afeard of. That's just what I told Tom you'd think. Now you come along to camp and see him, and he'll tell you the whole thing. You've known him for years, and I'll bet you've never caught him in a lie."

If they wanted me to go to their camp there was nothing else for it. His words puzzled me very much. I did not see how Ballou could explain satisfactorily; but I had known him for a long time, and we had been the best of friends. Could we have been mistaken in our estimate of his recent actions?

I pondered over this as we went along. There was not the least suggestion that I was a prisoner. I had my rifle. Sometimes I was in front and sometimes behind. They did not seem to watch me at all.

It was afternoon when we reached the camp by the creek. The Indian woman and Louis seemed to be its only occupants. The latter grinned broadly.

"Hallo, mon vieux! So ol' Jackstraws roun' you up, hey? Well, dat's all right. Purty soon we——"

"Where's Tom?" Hayes interrupted.

"Tom, he's pass himself up dat creek."

"I'm goin' for him," said Hayes. "It's just as I said. They think we been tryin' to steal them furs. That's what you done by that fool play of yours. I want Tom to explain the whole thing to Bob, here. So don't you go muddlin' things up worse. Bob will understand when Tom tells him."

Louis gaped at him for a moment.

"Well, bagosh——" he began and checked him-

self. "Sure t'ing," he said. "Yas, for sure he's understan' when Tom tell him. Oh, yas! By dam! For sure!" He nodded violently with each syncopated exclamation. But nevertheless he seemed like a man who laughs at a joke because others do, and not because he himself sees the point of it.

However, while Hayes went to find Ballou, he set on the tea pail and gave me bread and cold venison and rice with brown sugar, which was a great deal better than scorched porky.

Nootka Charlie ate also, waited on by his klootchman. She was a young woman, very good-looking for a squaw, and neater than most of them; but there was something hard in her face and eye which I did not like. Just once she spoke to Nootka in a tongue that I did not understand, and he answered briefly in the same language. When he had eaten he smoked; and she brought water from the creek, and wood for Louis' fire quite as a matter of course, so that evidently Nootka was not trying to convert her to white women's customs. After that she seated herself and went to sewing a pair of moccasins.

Hayes came back with Ballou and Siwash George. But like Nootka, the latter gave no evidence that he remembered me. Ballou greeted me without the least embarrassment, and went straight to the point.

"Hayes tells me," he said, "that you all think we double-crossed you—that we was tryin' to steal them furs. Is that so, Bob?"

"Of course it is," I replied. "What else could we think? You took us to the wrong lake. You made a bluff at prospecting to get us out of the way. And then when we found out about this lake by accident, Louis took a stranger's canoe and came back to warn you. Isn't that plenty?"

"Lookin' at it that way, it is," he admitted. "But there's two sides to every story, Bob, and there's been many an innocent man hanged because appearances was against him. You've known me some years, and we've been friends. You never knew me to do anything that wasn't straight, did you?"

"No," I acknowledged.

"So that if I'm crooked now it'll be for the first time," he went on. "I wouldn't play a low-down trick like stealin' them furs, not if they was worth a million. I ain't built that way. Now let me tell you about it:

"In the first place I was fooled on that lake. I sure thought she was Ahtikamag. I'd have been thinkin' so yet if we hadn't met up with Nootka and George, here, and they told me different. Ain't that so, George?"

"Sure, that's so," the old squawman confirmed. "It was a horse onto you, all right."

"I own up to it," Ballou agreed. "Well then, when I found that out we turned right around and come back, hopin' you'd maybe stayed on the lake for a couple of days. But you'd went. I didn't know what to do. I ought to have sent a canoe after you, but I figgered you'd got a long start, and it would take a week to catch you. And then maybe for nothing. So we come here to see what things looked like. Well then, along comes Louis, and on the lower lakes he meets up with Nootka and George, that's comin' along easy behind us. So he come with them. And he tells us you'd run into two strangers and was comin' back with them. So, you see, we was expectin' you."

"But what did Louis leave us for?" I asked skeptically. "And why did he steal that canoe and turn ours loose? That looked pretty bad."

"So it did—it looked mighty bad. He shouldn't have done that. But the size of it is he got rattled. He didn't like them strangers, and he had a notion that they wasn't straight. He heard something that made him think they might try to hold you up for the furs, and the best thing he could think of was to find us. To get time for that he turned your canoe loose, knowin' you'd find it

after a while, and he took theirs. That's how it was, wasn't it, Louis?"

"Dat's it," Louis agreed. "I ain't lak them fellers, me. I t'ink mebbe dey roll you for dem fur if dey get de chance."

"If Louis had wanted to set you afoot he would have busted up your canoe," Ballou continued. "I'd have sent him right back, only you was comin' anyhow, and then we found the cache. The very next day we was goin' to load up and start to meet you, only that night our canoes was took. At the time we didn't think of it bein' you, not knowin' you was feelin' hostile, and that's why them canoes got away in the smoke. I guess we didn't hurt nobody, though, and I'm mighty glad of that. Now that's the straight truth, Bob, and so there's no reason for anybody hidin' out. All there is to do is for them to bring back the canoes, load up and start for home."

Now as he told it, with his steady eyes on mine and his prophetlike beard giving him dignity the explanation sounded very plausible, perhaps more so than it looks in print. And then I had known him and Louis for years, and they were my friends. Rightly or wrongly I am slow to believe evil of friends if there is any doubt whatever.

"Well," I said, "that's different, of course. But you can see how things looked to us."

"Sure I can," he said heartily. "Hayes tells me you don't know where Dunleath and Fothergill and the canoes is. Well, of course they're down the lake somewhere. Thinkin' we were out to steal them furs—and 'specially after that shootin'—they'd lie low, and the more we looked for 'em the closer they'd stay cached. If we went with you they'd think we was maybe puttin' up a job. So the best thing is for you to go out alone and nanitch around and prospect for 'em. You can find sign as well as anybody, and if you go down along the shore and show yourself plenty, and maybe build a smoke or two or shoot a few times, you'll find 'em. Then you can explain to 'em how they've been barkin' up the wrong tree. We'll all stay right here in camp, so's you can deal it any way you like."

"I suppose that's the best way," I agreed.

"Then that's settled," he said with an air of relief. "Now come and take a look at these furs. They're most of 'em as good as when old Nitche cached 'em. You're sure a lucky kid to find 'em. I'll bet your sister'll have an outfit for winter such as a princess would give half her crown for. I can just see her at the landin' when we come in with the canoes loaded down."

CHAPTER XVI

IGNACE MOUNTAIN

MY feelings as I set out to prospect for my friends the next morning were very different from those of the day before. Then I had been hungry, and suspicious of every bush and coulee. Now I went along gayly, well fed and light of foot, the joy of strong youth in my heart and its resilience in my limbs.

I suppose most of us who are getting along in life remember rare, far-off days when the sunlight seemed pure gold, and the light breezes extraordinarily fresh and sweet, and the little crisping waves lisping to the beaches called and called, and their dancing play spoke to us as a babe's eyes to its mother. Or, if our early surroundings were different, it may be that we remember certain days of warm winds, and rippling, brown grasses, and the steady drum of a pony's hoofs; or perhaps it may be the sousing dip and lift of a slicing, creaming forefoot through blue water, and a slash of spray over the weather bow, and the thrumming, deep-sea voice of a tautened stay. But whatever it is we will never forget the sweetness of those rare, bygone days. At such times it seems to me we must have unconsciously brushed the hem

of something better and higher than our every-day lives, and that is why we remember.

At any rate that for me—at least the early hours of it—was such a day. I could smell the water, and the wet rocks, and the leaves and earth and moss, and distinguish between their scents. The joy of life saturated my whole being. I felt the impulse which drives a healthy young ainmal to play, and I traveled fast because of it.

But when I had been going for some hours my superfluous energy worked out. I had fired a shot or two, as suggested by Ballou, but I had built no smokes. Toward noon I found a little, trickling creek, and by the mouth of it I built a fire with a big smoke. Beside this I sat down to rest and eat and to wonder what, logically, had become of my outfit.

It was clear that they had pulled out in their canoe, no doubt warned by the shooting. And they must have gone down the lake, as they could not have paddled against that wind. They would reason that whatever had happened to me could not be cured. But they would keep a close watch on the lake from some vantage point, and not seeing any canoes on it they might deduce a connection between that fact and my disappearance; for if Ballou had both furs and canoes, naturally he would have pulled out without delay.

And then I became aware that something or somebody was near me. I had heard no sound, seen nothing; and yet I could feel some strange presence. I looked behind me.

There, scarcely fifteen feet distant, stood an Indian. He was a man of thirty or so, well built, and he had been at one time rather pleasant featured. But one side of his face was horribly scarred and twisted. His head was bare, and his hair done in two braids which hung in front of his shoulders. A rifle was tucked under his arm and a buffalo knife was at his belt.

Having known Indians all my life and found them no worse than other people according to their lights, I felt surprise merely, mingled with a certain annoyance that he should have been able to approach without my knowledge, for I had a very good opinion of my ears.

"Hallo!" I said. "Bo' jou,' nitche!"

"Klaho-wya, tenas man," said he, using the Chinook whereas I had given him the more eastern form of greeting. And this told me that he was from farther west.

Now "tenas man" means small man or boy, as the case may be, and it ruffled my dignity.

"Why do you sneak up behind me—mamook halo noise?" I demanded. "That's a cultus trick!"

"You mamook tumtum," he replied, signifying that I was so lost in meditation that I had not heard him.

"Well, come and sit down anyway," I said.

As he came forward I saw that his right leg was shorter than the other, so that he walked with a limp. He sat down, and, taking a pipe from his firebag, filled it with a mixture of tobacco and kinnikinnick, as I could tell by the peculiar, pungent odor of the smoke. He smoked in silence, and I sat in silence, looking at his scarred face.

"Where you come from?" he asked at length.

I told him and asked him the same question; and he replied that he came from the Smoky River country. He spoke very good English for an Indian, using only an occasional word of Chinook after the first.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Look for fur country. Mebbe trap."

"You have come a long way for it."

"Yas," he admitted, "long way. What name, you?"

"Bob Cory. What's yours?"

"Me Ignace Mountain."

"Are you alone?"

"Yas, all alone," he replied somberly, and frowned at the ground. "Where you camp?"

"I told him where Ballou's camp was, and he flicked a quick glance at me.

"'How many man stop?"

"Nine men. One woman."

Again his glance flickered at me, a sudden fire in it.

"Mebbe white woman?"

"No, she's an Indian."

He drew a long breath, exhaled a cloud of pungent smoke, and shook his head.

"No good!" he commented. "Nine white men, one klootchman. Mebbe she mesachie klootchman, hey?"

I told him that she was not a bad woman, that she was the wife of one of the men.

"What you call him?"

"His name is Simmons—Nootka Charlie, they call him."

"Um!" he grunted. "You think leplet malieh?"

By which he meant a marriage by a priest, in other words a proper ceremony. Of course I knew nothing about that, though I did not suppose there had been anything of the kind.

"Um!" he said again. "What they mamook here?"

It was not necessary to tell him about the furs, and I said they were prospecting.

"Hiyu white man stop," he said. "Mebbe other white man him prospect, too?"

"Other white men?" I cried. "Do you know where they are?"

"Ah-ha," he assented.

"I'm looking for them. Will you show me their camp?"

"Him your tillikum?"

"Yes."

"Him tillikum of other white men—tillikum of Nootka Challie?"

I told him they did not know Nootka, and were not especially friendly with the others; but they were my friends.

"No go now," he said. "Bimeby polaklie chako. Mebbe then."

"Why must we wait till dark?"

But he would not answer that, and merely repeated the words. When an Indian gets to repeating himself you might as well argue with a stump. So I gave it up.

"Why you make smoke?" he asked presently, and I told him. "No good," he said. "You come."

He got to his feet and limped off without another word, and I followed him, because I knew that if I didn't he would just let it go at that and be off on his own business, whatever it was. In spite of his short leg he traveled fast; but he

did not go far, though by accident or design he seemed to choose the roughest, stoniest walking. He led the way up the sharp shoulder of a rocky butte which commanded a good view of the lake. I could see in the distance the little island on which I had landed with my stolen canoes, and nearer, another and larger one. He pointed to the latter.

"Your tillikum stop!" he said.

Well, I wondered why I had not thought of that before. If somehow my friends knew that Ballou had lost his canoes, an island would be the most natural place for them to stop. And anyway, they could see more from an island than from the mainland. I could have found them at any time by paddling down the lake.

"You got canoe?" I asked, and he nodded.

And so I let it go at that, knowing it would be useless to urge him until he got ready. We settled down in the bushes that fringed the summit of the butte. But five minutes afterward Ignace touched my arm and pointed. Sighting over his hand I saw the figure of a man moving near the shore, and as he came closer I recognized the half-breed, Peter. The smoke I had made was now faint, but he disappeared heading straight for it.

Ignace Mountain grinned twistedly at me.

"Smoke hiyu no good," said he. "Him nanitch for you. You no nanitch for him, hey?"

I certainly was not looking for the breed. I wondered why he was prowling there, for Ballou had said they would all stay in camp. I didn't like the look of it. Of course the breed might have some message for me, but I decided to lie low. Presently he came out of the bushes, on the farther side of the little creek, and the last we saw of him he was heading down the lake.

The afternoon dragged on. I slept, but the Indian did not. Whenever I woke he was lying as he had lain at first, flat on his stomach behind the screen of bushes, his somber eyes watchful. He must have been a rather handsome fellow before he had met with the accident which had so horribly disfigured him. I wondered, as I looked at the scars, what had caused them. He caught my glance, and, interpreting it, tapped his twisted face with his finger.

"You look," he said, simply. "Bear mamook. Siam."

"A bear did it! A grizzly! Was he a big one? Tell me about it!"

"Not so dam big; but hyas dam bad. Me shoot um, think him mimoluse. Bushes thick—so!" He held up his fingers interlaced to illustrate. "Me go in. Him no mimoluse. Me shoot again. No

good—too close. Then we fight." He tapped the handle of his big knife. "Steep hill, all rock. Roll down um." He twisted over on his back, his left arm held protectively over his face, his right arm jerking in short, vicious stabs. "Me go all same mimoluse—all same dead. Bimeby wake up. Bear him mimoluse. Leg bust." He glanced down at his crippled limb. "Hyas bad, you bet!"

"Were you all alone?"

"Yas, all alone. Me hyas dam sick."

As he told the story in his clipped phrases I could visualize the steep, rocky hillside, the dead bear, and the Indian, his face in tatters, his leg broken, miles from human aid.

"What did you do?"

"Not moch. Too sick. Bimeby—next day—make fire, eat bear meat. Bimeby split sticks to fix leg. Tie him up tight. Then me klatawa."

"How?" I asked.

For answer he put the butt of his rifle beneath his armpit crutch fashion, and took a stick in his other hand.

"So!" he said simply.

"Great Scott!" I exclaimed. "How far did you have to go that way?"

"Mebbe moxt tahtlum—twenty mile."

I whistled in sympathy. Twenty miles of rough, mountain going on an improvised crutch, with a

broken leg, albeit roughly splinted, swinging and dangling, a pendulum of agony!

"Could you get a doctor when you got home?"

"No, no doctin stop in my country."

I asked no more questions. He had come through a hard mill, and the memory of it seemed to fall upon him like a deep shadow. He stared somberly into vacancy, with frowning brows and set mouth.

The sun was down when we descended from the butte. Ignace led the way through the growing dusk, traveling with swiftness and certainty. A mile down the lake in dense brush he had cached his canoe. And when darkness had fallen completely we put out upon the lake, striking out into the middle of it so as to be invisible from the shore. After half an hour's paddling the island loomed ahead of us. We drew into a little bay, and as the bow touched the shore a voice from the darkness said:

"Don't get outa that canoe, friends. And don't get funny with no guns!"

"Don't get funny with yours, Dinny," I laughed.

"Well, by thunder!" he exclaimed. "Ike, I'm an Injun if here ain't that durn fool kid that we thought we was rid of!"

"Can't lose bad money nohow," said Toft's quiet voice, with a chuckle.

CHAPTER XVII

HOMEWARD BOUND

BY George," said Mr. Fothergill, "old Tom Ballou's straight after all."

"About as straight," said Jim Dunleath, "as a clove hitch."

I had told them my story, receiving theirs in return. Briefly this was that they had been awakened —or, rather, Toft had been awakened by the sound of shots. Finding me gone he had sneaked up the shore, as I had done, and coming within earshot of the camp had heard enough to enable him to guess the rest. Immediately on his return they had pulled down the lake in the hope of seeing me. We must have been within a very short distance of each other at one time. They ran clean down the lake, and in the morning searched the shores, beating Ballou to it, but found nothing. The next night they searched the islands, and found the canoes where I had left them. Thus they knew that I was neither shot nor drowned. Then they brought the canoes to the larger island and established themselves there, knowing that I had a canoe, and crediting me with more common sense than I displayed.

"I don't see why you should say that," said Mr. Fothergill, referring to Dunleath's comment. "Just look at this thing sensibly. We all make mistakes. Tom has owned up to his. His explanation is plausible, isn't it?"

"It's too plausible."

"Nonsense! What's wrong with it."

"Mostly that I don't believe it. Without the canoes they're ditched, and they know it. They hope to get them back by a nice, smooth story. And I don't like the company Ballou keeps. Those two—Nootka Charlie and his friend Siwash George—are bad actors, aren't they, Dinny?"

"Plenty cultus, both of 'em," Dinny affirmed. "Rustlers, claim jumpers, whisky peddlers, squaw men—they don't make 'em much worse."

"But they haven't a thing to do with the case," Mr. Fothergill argued. "Tom met 'em by accident. They merely told him of his mistake, and came along to show him the ground. We ought to be grateful to them. You're prejudiced, Jim."

"I am," Dunleath replied. "I tell you I don't trust Ballou."

"Oh, bosh!" Mr. Fothergill returned impatiently. "I've known him longer than you have. Bob's known him longer still. Bob, did you ever know or hear of anything to his discredit—anything he had ever done that wasn't straight?"

"No," I admitted, "I never did."

"And there you are!" said Mr. Fothergill triumphantly. "A man's reputation in the country he lives in ought to count for something. 'By their fruits ye shall know them!' That's Scripture—in case you don't recognize it."

"Speaking of fruit," Dunleath retorted, "did you ever hear of 'a goodly apple, rotten at the core?' Which is Shakespeare, Wally, if it gets past you."

Thus it was nearly a deadlock in opinion. Pack and Toft were conservative, expressing none. For my part I was betwixt and between, doubtful but hopeful.

In the morning, things came to a show-down Dinny Pack, who had been to the upper end of the island, announced that a canoe was coming down the lake.

As it neared our island we saw that Ballou was in the bow and Louis in the stern. Moreover, I recognized it as the one I had cached.

They made straight for the island, and Louis waved his paddle when he saw us. Without the least hesitation Ballou stepped ashore and held out his hand to Mr. Fothergill.

"So Bob did find you," he said. "Well, I'm glad of that. It shows I had the right tumtum. I guess he's told you how come this mix-up."

"He's told us," Mr. Fothergill replied, "and it's

all right with me, Tom. But Dunleath doesn't seem to understand it, yet."

Ballou looked Jim Dunleath square in the face.

"What don't you understand?" he asked.

"If you want it straight, Ballou," Dunleath replied, "I find it mighty hard to believe any of it."

"That's plain, anyhow," Ballou acknowledged. "I'd rather have you come out straight than be holdin' something against me. Well, I dunno's I can say any more'n I told Bob. The furs are yours any time you want to take 'em. That ought to be proof enough. But what I want to say special is that the boys feel kind of sore. You see I had a hard job to get 'em to come back to make another hunt for the cache. They done it out of good will, and because I told 'em it was the straight thing to do; and they had the gold fever pretty bad. Then you come along and lift the canoes. Well, them canoes was theirs—some of 'em, anyway. They bought 'em. This here one belongs to Nootka Charlie. We found it cached a mile or so below camp. Somebody"—his eye dwelt on me for a moment—"landed there and left it. Nootka and his partner don't know you at all, and they're sore, too. If we'd found it before, we'd have been here before, because I figgered you was on one of these islands. Now, the boys want to pull out for the place they was headed for before

we turned back. They've lost a lot of time over this, and they want to go now. I ain't goin' and neither is Louis. And here's the proposition: Let the boys have two canoes—enough to hold them and their outfit—and buy the others back from them. You got two men here. Me and Louis is two more. We can handle the rest of the canoes, and they'll hold the load. Of course, if you'd rather not have me and Louis, that goes without a murmur. Only we're goin' home, and we've sure got to have some way of gettin' there. I guess you wouldn't see us walk."

"No, of course not," said Mr. Fothergill. "Hang it, Jim, this is a fair proposition. What do you say? You're the only one that's hanging back."

Dunleath looked Ballou in the face, and the older man returned his gaze without a waver.

"All right," he said at last, "I'll go you on it, Ballou."

"Shake!" said Ballou, holding out his hand. "Darned if I don't like you better for talking out in meetin'. Now the boys will pull out quick as they get canoes. So if you'll let us have the two now we'll tow 'em to camp, and you can come along when you get ready. You'll find us there. You see," he added with a quiet smile, "I'm not stackin' you up against a crowd you maybe think is hostile."

They departed, towing the canoes. Mr. Fothergill would have followed them at once, to show that he held no mistrust; but Jim Dunleath would not go. A couple of hours afterward the canoes passed, the paddlers hitting a steady stroke. They waved at us, and went on without stopping.

"Just as I told you," said Mr. Fothergill. "You can depend on whatever Ballou tells you."

"Except as to lakes, and such trifling things."

"I wouldn't have your suspicious mind," Mr. Fothergill retorted, "for all the furs between here and Point Barrow. Why did you shake with him if you're going to talk that way?"

As we began to stow our dunnage Ignace Mountain held out his hand to me.

"Goo'-by!" said he.

"You come with us," I said, "and we'll pay you well."

"Certainly," said Jim. "Another good paddler will come in handy."

"No," Ignace refused. "Me klatawa now."

And so saying, he shook hands all around, and having received part of a sack of flour and some tobacco got into his canoe and went down the lake with swinging, driving strokes.

"That Injun," said Dinny, "is lookin' for a fur district, is he?"

"That's what he told me."

"Well, he's sure got a poor outfit. I'll bet he ain't got fifty pounds of grub. And no traps that I could see. Course, he can make deadfalls. But he ain't got no outfit to winter on."

"An Indian doesn't require as much as a white man," said Mr. Fothergill with an air of knowledge. "He can draw subsistence—food and clothing—from the wilderness."

"He'd a durn sight sooner draw them from the company," Dinny returned. "You read that stuff in books, but it don't go. I s'pose before there was tradin' posts the nitches wiggled along without 'em—had to. But you can bet that an Injun nowadays outfits the best he can. When he goes out for the winter he takes all he can pack—if he can get it."

"Perhaps he couldn't get it."

"A good hunter can always get it—unless he's crooked, somehow. This fellow ought to be good. He's a long way off his range. It don't look natural to me. I wouldn't wonder if he was in some sort of trouble."

"What do you mean?" Dunleath asked.

"Well, he may have slipped a knife into some other nitche, or shot him and had to pull out. You can't tell."

"That ain't our business," Toft pointed out.

"Course not," Dinny agreed. "Far's I'm con-

cerned he could have cleaned out his whole band if he wanted to. If he come through that scrap with the bear, like he told Bob, he's a game nitche, all right. Seems to be sorter lyin' low. I noticed he wasn't in sight while we was talkin' to Ballou and the Frenchman."

That was so, though nobody else had noticed it at the time. We embarked, and after bucking a head wind which had arisen, reached the creek, and made up the stiff current, finding Ballou and Louis waiting for us, the latter with a good meal ready.

It was quite like old times to see Louis around the fire juggling grub. Dinny and he seemed willing to let bygones be bygones. All outwardly was harmony, and so far as I could see, it was real enough.

Naturally I was jubilant. There were the furs. After all, things had turned out right. I saw opening before me the fulfillment of a number of boyish dreams. Now I would work no more on the ranch. Instead I would go to the far North, with Dinny and Toft if I could hire them, and hunt, and fish, and wash gold from the sands, and rove winter and summer to my heart's content. Uncle Fred should have money to meet his payments. And Peggy, who longed for cities and such truck, should have what her heart desired.

For to me my share of the furs seemed wealth inexhaustible and limitless.

"Well, Bob, what are you going to do with it?" Jim Dunleath asked; and I started, for I had not heard him come up behind me.

"How did you know what I was thinking of?"

"Guessed, mostly. I've been making a few plans, myself."

"What kind of plans?"

"You'll probably be surprised," he said. "But the first thing I'm going to do is to marry your sister—that is if she'll let me. I haven't asked her yet."

I grinned at him.

"I suppose you think that's news. Why didn't you take a chance the night you said good-by? You held her hands long enough. I sure thought you were going to kiss her."

"What the devil do you know about that?" he demanded, reddening; and I told him.

"I guess Peg will marry you," I predicted confidently. "Any one could see she was gone on you. But you ought to have seen how hostile she got when I told her so."

"You told her so? You young brute!"

"That's what she said. I don't see what there was to get mad about, but she swung on my ear.

It was a real punch, too. You want to look out for her right if you marry her."

"She ought to have taken an ax to you. That was a deuce of a thing to say."

"I didn't mean any harm."

"Hell's full of people who didn't," my prospective brother-in-law growled. "Well, the only reason I didn't ask her then was that I was as poor as Pharaoh's lean kine. I decided to wait and see how we came out on this. Now it looks all right—if we don't slip up somehow."

"What can we slip up on?"

"I don't know," he replied. "That's what bothers me."

Of course he was referring to Ballou, and I considered him unreasonable. The days that followed served to confirm me in that opinion.

We made an early start the next morning while the dawn fogs still hung heavy on the lake, shrouding island and bay and headland in clinging, gray drapery.

Dinny Pack and I were together in one canoe. Bales of fur were piled between us. Ahead, in the fog, Louis Beef's big voice was raised in some almost forgotten voyageurs' song, such as his kind had sung for generations on the water highways of the great North in red dawns and purple twi-

lights. The tunk of unseen paddles punctuated it. I felt quite like one of the old voyageurs, companion to Champlain or Radisson, as I swung my own paddle, tracking the invisible canoe ahead by the running swirl of its wake.

CHAPTER XVIII

TREACHERY

"MAY as well pull in here and camp," said Ballou, resting on his paddle. "I guess we'll have to portage them rapids. If it was high water, and the canoes was light, and a dump didn't matter much, I'd run 'em. The way it is I guess it would be risky."

"It'd be taking a chance," Toft agreed. "There's one or two bad dips, and the way the water is now, like as not we'd hit."

Below us sounded the sullen grumble of fast water. The river there ran between steep rocks, so that there was no foothold for lining down. On our way in we had been forced to portage half a mile or more over a poor trail. Ballou had hoped to run the rapid coming back, but the water had lowered dangerously.

Deferring to this experienced advice we went ashore and made camp. Though it was earlier than usual none of us felt like tackling the packing job on the heel of a day's hard paddling; nor did most of us look forward to the carry on the morrow with much pleasure, though, of course, it

was all in the day's work. My experience has been that nine white men out of ten absolutely hate packing. Indians, of course, are different. But then nobody but themselves knows what they really think about it.

But Louis seemed to rather enjoy the prospect.

"You t'ink mebbe de ol' pea soup he ain't so good lak he used to be," he said with a grin. "Bagosh, I show you! I bet any man five dollaire I pack five hundred on dat portage if I get heem on my back."

"I'll bet any man *I* don't," said Dinny. "'Bout two hundred is my limit; and I'd rather pack one."

"I bet ten dollaire!" Louis declared encouragingly.

"Bet with yourself and win," Dinny told him. "I seen a man pack eight hundred once. Me, I hate packin'. It's a Siwash's job. I wisht we was at the foot of that portage."

Louis grinned widely.

"You mak' lot of fuss 'bout not'ing," said he. "You ain't want to holler before somet'ing hurt you. Mebbe you ain't have to pack so dam moch lak you——"

"Shut up, Louis!" rasped Ballou sharply.

"Well, I'll jus' tol' him not for worry," said the big Frenchman. "If I'm young man lak heem——"

"That'll be all," Ballou ordered. "You're too

blame fond of pickin' at people. It's made trouble for you before now."

Louis said no more, but he kept his grin and chuckled to himself as if he had some private joke.

This was the first jarring note that had been struck in the five days that had elapsed since we left the lakes. Louis had been consistently cheerful and obliging, quite his old self. The way he handled his cooking job was enough to make him popular. He could rustle a meal quicker than any camp cook I ever saw, no small consideration when you land tired and wolfish at night. He was an artist with a fire. At his will it seemed to burn brightly or produce beds of coals; while for others it would merely smoke and blacken. Ballou was the same as ever; capable, quiet, considerate, doing more than his share of the work. He and Mr. Fothergill were on the best of terms again, and the latter was planning a shoot in the late fall, on which Ballou and Louis should accompany him.

Now when we had eaten, there was still an hour's light, and it occurred to me that I might occupy that time more profitably than by loafing in camp. Not that I wanted to do any packing; but we were low on meat, and I thought I might get a deer. Accordingly I picked up my

rifle and sauntered away as casually as I could, for I never liked company when hunting.

Once clear of the camp I struck back and to the north, away from the portage. But when I had gone half a mile, to my disgust the light wind which had been in my face switched to the south. There was no use hunting down wind, and so I turned around and angled off southward. This course finally brought me past the camp and opposite the fast water of the long rapid, at which no deer could drink because of the steepness of the banks. Therefore I put my best foot foremost to get below the portage while the light lasted.

I turned toward the river and slipped along noiselessly; and at last I came upon what looked like a well-used runway, winding in and out but trending in the direction of water. I followed it until I came close to the river below the rapid and the portage, where the banks were flat and the water swirled in pools; and there I established myself in a jumble of rocks at the edge of a spruce thicket.

As the light began to fail, away up the game trail something moved, a shadow among shadows. Gradually it seemed to detach itself, and I made out the shape of a young buck. But he seemed suspicious. Instead of coming forward boldly to drink he halted, took a few steps and halted again,

this time half hidden from view. With that, and with the poor light, accurate work was impossible, and so I waited for a better chance. But he remained indistinct against a shadowy background. Possibly he had winded me, or perhaps my footsteps beside his accustomed trail had given some warning to his sensitive nostrils.

Suddenly I caught the white of his lifted flag, and then the bounding thump of his sharp hoofs. Whatever he had found to verify his suspicions, he was gone. Disgusted I rose from my shelter, my hope of fresh meat vanishing. And then I ducked back into cover again, for from downstream I saw the figure of a man coming toward me. Just why I cached myself so promptly I do not know. I suppose I merely obeyed some primal, furtive instinct common to boys, savages, and wild animals. But as the man came nearer I recognized him. It was Hayes!

I drew a long breath of amazement and lay very still. What on earth was Hayes, whom we had supposed a hundred miles or so to the north, doing there? All my suspicions, which had been laid, sprang to life. I determined to follow him and see what he was up to.

But opposite me he halted, and after scanning the foot of the portage for a moment, came over and sat down on a rock not twenty feet from my

place of concealment. I heard him grunt and curse as some twinge caught his old body, and in a moment the smoke of his tobacco drifted across my nostrils. Very cautiously I raised myself and took a peep at him through the concealment of bushes. He sat smoking, facing upstream in an attitude of attention as if expecting something or somebody. But whom?

For five minutes nothing happened. Then he whistled, and from the distance it was returned. A second figure came out of the dusk, a man, tall and bearded—Ballou! As I recognized him I sank low and almost held my breath.

"I begun to think you was hung up somewheres," said Hayes. "I looked for you last night."

"Too much pilgrim," Ballou returned. "Heavy loads and late starts. Dunleath won't leave the furs in the canoes nights. It's a case of load every mornin'. There ain't a chance to get 'em the way I thought."

Hayes swore. "So that she comes to a showdown at last, does she?"

"That's about the size of it," Ballou agreed.

"And that's what I told you from the start," said Hayes. "I told you these foxy plays was no good. They never won for me yet. My tumtum was to take 'em right to Ahtikamag, and as soon as we found the cache, hold 'em up and leave 'em

with about one gun and some grub. They'd have got out all right. There wouldn't have been no trouble—just two pilgrims and the kid. Instid of that you go fixin' it foxy, and what happens? Why they meet up with two old-timers, that's both bad med'cine if I know anything—'specially that Toft, I ain't sure I ain't seen him some place—and we have the bad luck to run into old Siwash George, and he's wise in a minute when he sees us pirootin' 'round that country, and he rings himself in, and his partner, too. That's two more to split with. Then they kapswaller them canoes, and you make a fool dicker to git 'em back, and you say leave it to you, and we'll git the furs without no rough stuff, and without hurtin' nobody. You make me tired, Tom. The way to work a holdup is with a gun. That's clean and simple, and you git what you start out to git."

"That's all right," Ballou returned. "I thought we could get them furs without no one but ourselves knowin' it. That was worth tryin' for, wasn't it? The country ain't like it used to be, when if you killed a man all you had to watch out for was his friends. If we could have got away with it we could have lived the way we been livin', and nobody the wiser. I've had a price on my scalp before now, and so have you, and it ain't pleasant. Well, I've done my best to get the

furs without trouble, and it don't seem to work. I guess we'll just have to take 'em."

"Sure!" Hayes returned grimly. "When?"

"To-night," Ballou replied. "The farther we go the shorter start we get, and to market them furs the way we want to, we'll need all our time."

"Now you're whistlin'!" Hays grunted. "How will we do it?"

"Jump 'em in their blankets," Ballou answered. "Toft's the only one that don't sleep like a winterin' bear. He's about as wide-awake as a weasel, but I'll look after him. Louis will handle the red-head—he's achin' to do it. Dunleath's the only other one that's any use, and McGregor can fix him. Make it for about one o'clock in the mornin'. I'll be listenin' for you."

"Good enough," Hayes agreed. "I'd ruther do it with a gun, like I'm used to, but mebbe this is better. Only no durn nonsense about this, Tom. Them furs are ours. We've earned 'em. When I think of the days when we was with old Nitche McNab—me and you and Louis—and how we mushed and starved and froze, and then was et alive by flies and hunted like wolves for the bounty on our scalps, you bet no man's goin' to stand between me and them skins. I'm playin' this with no limit. I don't want to hurt nobody, no more than you do, but by——"

His speech trailed off into crackling blasphemy. I listened with a very queer feeling in my stomach. Now, for the first time, a number of things were made plain. Hayes and Ballou and Louis had been Nitche McNab's men, members of that band of raiders who had harried the great company before I was born. It was due to Ballou's prudence merely, and not to his scruples, that we had not been robbed of the furs long ago. Now he had discarded both scruples and prudence. We were to be overpowered in our sleep, set afoot in the wilderness. All my plans for my future and for Peggy's future were to be knocked on the head.

I crouched among the rocks, quivering with impotent rage. I felt a wild, savage desire to shoot them both as they sat. I rose to peer out at them, and as I did so my arm dislodged a loose stone, which fell and, striking another, set up a most infernal clatter. I heard a deep oath from Ballou.

"Something in them rocks!" snarled Ballou. "If it's somebody——"

But I waited to hear no more, for I knew about what would happen if I were caught. Bent double I dodged around a big, upstanding boulder and made a leap across an open space for another at the edge of the spruce. But in the opening I was seen and recognized.

"By——" snarled Hayes, "it's that kid! He was listenin'!"

"Don't shoot!" Ballou cried. "They'll hear——"

"Hear hell!" roared Hayes. "What'll they hear if he gits away?"

Bang! The bullet hummed past my ear, and five others followed it as fast as he could work the gun. But old hand as he was, he missed me completely. For I was going through the semi-darkness in the brush like a scared cat, dodging and twisting like a rabbit, and he had to shoot principally by guess and the noise I made.

I came out on the far side of the spruce, and went across a hundred yards of open in the quickest time I ever made. I think I broke all records for the next cover. Just as I reached it Ballou brought his rifle into action. I recognized the higher power of the weapon by the wicked zizz of the projectile even before I heard the ringing, clean-cut smack of its report. With a little more light he would never have missed me, but I suppose he allowed too much foresight in the twilight, and shot high.

Now I have never been one to turn the other cheek to the smiter. As a means of terminating hostilities I consider a fast, hard counter far more effective, as well as preferable. Even when I was running and dodging I was full of anger at being

shot at as if I had been a hunted beast. And so the minute I got into the second cover I jumped behind a tree, raised my rifle and cut loose at Ballou.

But what with excitement and exertion I could not steady my hands. The muzzle twitched uncontrollably. And when, after the second ineffectual shot, I jammed the gun against the tree for steadiness, my enemies had taken cover. I pumped three shots on general principles, and Ballou fired at the flash of the third, the bullet striking the tree in front of me with a swift "pluck." However, I had checked them, and I left them to figure it out, while I made tracks for camp.

I burst into it, badly winded from my haste.

"What's up, Bob?" cried Jim Dunleath. "What was all that shooting?"

"Ballou and Hayes tried to get me!" I gasped. "The whole crowd is on the river below here. Hayes and Ballou and Louis—oh, look out for Louis! Stop him!"

For at my words Louis Beef began to step backward softly. As I uttered his name he turned and bounded for the brush as lightly as a lynx, in spite of his years and bulk. Before any one could make a move to intercept him he was gone.

CHAPTER XIX

THE STAND-OFF

"COME on," said Toft, when, having recovered my wind, I had given them a more connected account, "we ain't got a minute to lose."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mr. Fothergill.

"Pull!" Toft replied. "This ain't no place to work a stand-off—too much brush and no chance for clear shootin'."

"But do you think——"

"Get a hump on you, Fothergill," Dinny interrupted. "Quit talkin' and grab your iktas. We got to be in them canoes quicker'n scat. Fly at it now. Load everything in a hurry."

Luckily the canoes were but partially unloaded. We piled in what had been taken out without waiting to stow, shoved out and made for the opposite bank. Hugging it closely we paddled upstream, but we could not have gone more than five hundred yards when we heard a shout and a clamor of voices from the site of our camp.

We paddled on steadily for half an hour and then held a council of war.

"Their canoes is below the rapids," said Toft, "and that's lucky. They won't be able to get 'em over the portage before mornin', likely. That gives us a chance to organize ourselves."

"Do you seriously think they'll try to take the furs by force?" Mr. Fothergill asked.

"If Ballou and them was with Nitche's bunch there ain't no doubt about it," Toft replied. "Nootka and Siwash George would be in any play like that, too. If you want to keep them furs you got to fight for them, that's my tumtum."

"It's a safe supposition, anyway," Dunleath agreed.

"Well," said Dinny, "all we can do is to keep on goin' till we find some place that looks good. We want to get something like a hill at our backs and clear ground in front. In this brush we wouldn't have no show."

If it has ever been your lot to paddle all day, and then at night turn around and buck a current with a heavily loaded canoe, you know that it is no joke. Always against your weary arms and shoulders there is the unwearied pressure of the current, no matter how cunningly you strive to take advantage of eddies and backwaters. The moment you relax your efforts the dark banks, which seem to be passing you so slowly, stand still; and if there are other canoes these draw

away from you and you must fight back your lost distance at the cost of extra exertion.

The first gray of dawn found me swinging my paddle doggedly, but mechanically, with the snap and drive of the effective stroke all gone. There were cold cramps between my shoulders, and I was dog-tired to my very bones.

But dawn revealed also a broken country. Along the river bank it was still heavily bushed, but back from that perhaps a quarter of a mile, rose a steep hill with outcroppings of bare rock. Toft and Pack landed to investigate, and shortly returned with a favorable report.

"Good as we can hope for," said the former. "Anyway, we got to get off this river. By swampin' out a trail a little ways we can pack in the whole outfit, canoes and all. We'll have to do that. It's some job, but it's a case."

Toft and I swamped a trail while the others packed, and when we were through we helped them. I staggered in under the foot of the hill with my first load, and saw the place which Toft had chosen.

It was at the base of the rocky hill which afforded positive protection from the rear. Boulders and huge fragments which had fallen would give shelter in front. There the ground was fairly open for several hundred yards. On the whole we might

have searched far for a better natural defensive position.

At last we finished the job, and I was glad of it. It seemed to me that I could not have carried another load. And Jim Dunleath and Dinny, who had worked like demons, apparently matching their strength and endurance, frankly lay down and panted.

"Of course they'll see the trail we swamped out," said Toft; "but they'd find us anyhow. They'll have a man or two on each side skinnin' the banks for sign, and the rest will come up in the canoes. There wouldn't be much get past them."

Dinny went back to the river to keep watch, and I went to sleep. I woke with the sound of his voice.

"They're comin' just about the way you said, Ike. Some of 'em must be ashore, for they ain't all in the canoes."

"Let 'em come," said Toft. "While we're waitin' we may's well pile up a few more rocks."

While I had slept they had been busy constructing a breastwork of stones, and it made an excellent shelter. I helped them add to it, and while we were working, the half-breed appeared. For a moment he stood watching us and then disappeared.

When he returned, the whole crew came with him. They halted well in shelter; but Ballou

walked straight toward us. He was unarmed, and as he came, he held up his right hand, palm toward us.

"Peace sign," said Dinny. "How close is he to come?"

"All the way," said Dunleath. "If he wants to talk we may as well hear him."

Ballou came up, picking his way carefully among the rocks. He smiled grimly at our breastwork.

"You look sorter organized," he commented.

"That's exactly the idea," Jim Dunleath told him.

"All right," he returned. "Now let's get right down to case cards. I want to make you a proposition about them furs."

"No use," said Dunleath.

"Don't get stiff-legged in such a hurry," Ballou reproved him. "Let's talk things over sensible. I'm willin' to go through them furs now, sort and grade 'em with you, and give you folks a third of 'em and call it square. How does that strike you?"

"Seeing that the furs are ours," said Dunleath, "it strikes me as a pretty nervy proposition."

"Never heard of such damned gall in my life!" Mr. Fothergill exploded wrathfully. "We know you for the infernal rascal that you are, Ballou. We know that you were with Nitche McNab. You can't fool us any longer."

"So Bob heard that, did he?" said Ballou with

a cold glance at me. "Well, I was with Nitche, and so was Hayes and Louis, and I guess you know that, too. We went through a hard racket, and in the end we lost the furs by Nitche liftin' the cache. All the same we consider 'em ours. You've got no right to 'em at all, but you had the luck to find the letter, and for that we'll give you a third, like I said."

"Generous of you!" Dunleath commented. "Why didn't you make that proposition back on the lakes?"

"I only make it now to save trouble," Ballou admitted brazenly. "That's what I've been tryin' to do all along. If I'd listened to Hayes you'd have been held up at the lakes to start with. But I thought it would be better to get you out of the country quiet and easy. Then when you come back and spoiled that play, some of the boys was for bushwhackin' you along the river. I wouldn't let 'em do that. I don't want to hurt nobody now, and nobody would have been hurt last night. We'd just have taken the furs, that's all."

The old raider spoke quietly, in the most matter-of-fact way. It was as if we had done him an injury, for which he forgave but reproved us.

"I'm tellin' you these things," he went on, "so's you'll savvy how the land lies. From first to last I've tried to steer clear of trouble. I've seen too

much of that. But all the same I want to make it clear that we're goin' to have them furs. I've made you a fair proposition. I make it again. If you turn it down we'll just take what we want any way we can get it. There'll be somebody killed, like as not. I don't want that, and I don't suppose you do."

"You can't kill anybody nowadays and get away with it," said Mr. Fothergill. "You can't bluff us a little bit."

Ballou shook his head at him as if he had been reproving a foolish child.

"About gettin' away with a killin'," he said, "it don't help them that's killed whether we do or not. That's a chance we take. But if you think I'm bluffin' I've just wasted my time. I hope you don't think that—the rest of you that has more sense than him—because if you do you're awful wrong."

If the matter had not been so serious I would have laughed at Mr. Fothergill's face. But as it was, Ballou's quiet words carried conviction far better than any bluster.

"Whether you're bluffing or not," said Dunleath, "we turn your proposition down cold. We're going to keep the furs, and you can do what you like about it."

"You're making a mistake," Ballou told him. "A third of them furs ain't a bad stake."

"The whole is that much better," Dunleath replied.

"Oh, well," Ballou returned, "if that's the way you look at it I'm just wastin' time. I'm sorry we can't deal, but it ain't my fault. So long."

He turned and walked slowly away. At thirty yards he paused to light his pipe, and, I think, to give Dunleath an opportunity to call him back. He rejoined his outfit, and we lost sight of them.

"I wouldn't show myself too much," said Toft. "Things is liable to happen any time."

Five minutes after, a bullet bit against the rock behind us, and the report of the rifle racketed back and forth between hill and river timber. Ballou had delivered his ultimatum. This was his declaration of war.

CHAPTER XX

THE NIGHT ATTACK

MR. FOTHERGILL picked up the flattened lead and dropped it with an exclamation.

"Didn't you know it was hot?" Dinny Pack grinned. "The twist of the riflin' does it. Keep your head down." For Mr. Fothergill had raised it dangerously.

"Don't be in no hurry to shoot," Toft advised. "Nothin' worries the other feller more than to act like his shootin' didn't bother you. By and by he gets careless or nervous, and gives you a chance."

"You talk as if you'd been there before," said Jim.

"Me?" Toft replied mildly. "Oh, well, I've talked with men that ought to know."

"You could get some pretty fair pointers just talkin' to yourself," said Dinny. "Now look: There's some feller down by that big rock in the middle of them saskatoons."

"I don't see nothing," said Toft.

"The bushes moved," Dinny asserted. "Somebody's there all right. I've a notion to stir him up."

"Save your ca'tridge till you get a good chance," Toft advised.

For a long time after that first shot nothing happened. We saw nobody, but we heard the sound of a distant ax.

"Makin' a camp of it," said Toft. "That shows they ain't in no hurry."

"Bluffing!" said Mr. Fothergill with conviction. "Pretty soon that old rascal, Ballou, will come along with a new proposition."

"He wants to have a bullet-proof proposition when he does come," Dinny commented grimly.

"Oh, he ain't bluffing," said Toft. "There ain't no bluff about them. Only thing is they ain't made up their minds yet how to play the hand. They may wait till dark."

"And then rush us?"

"More'n likely. But they may shoot us up a little before that."

The latter prediction came true. Presently we could see half a dozen of them in the distance. And then they vanished. Not a man was visible. The front seemed absolutely clear; but we knew that they were worming their way into range, taking advantage of tree and rock and brush, after the manner of the old Indian fighters.

A bullet spatted on a rock and glanced, leaving a gray streak of lead. As if this had been a signal half a dozen rifles opened on us. Here and there, in front and to right and left, rose

white smoke puffs, but so carefully did the marksmen keep under cover that we could see nobody.

"Lay low," Toft advised. "This don't cut no ice. They can keep this up all day and not hit no one except by accident."

It is astonishing how readily one becomes accustomed to being shot at. At first I was nervous, not needing Toft's injunction to lie low. But in a few minutes I listened to the popping of the rifles and the sing and rap of lead with comparative indifference. Only, I earnestly desired to do some shooting myself.

"That sport over there in them bushes," said Dinny, "is too durn reg'lar in his habits. Also he's got too good an eye. He's hit the chink between these here rocks twice. Next time he shoots let's all take a chance about two foot under his smoke. Somebody might catch him."

I wiggled around on my stomach and trained my sights upon the distant clump of saskatoons. I stared and stared just above the sights until my eyes blurred, while my heart pounded hard in my ears. A white puff, like so much wool, rose among the bushes. I caught it fair with the bead, dropped my muzzle a fraction of an inch, and pulled. The report of my rifle blended with Dinny's, and on the heels of it came others. Leaves and twigs flew in the distant bushes as the lead

swept them. I thought I could see a movement and fired again, but whether I had hit anything or not I could not tell.

"Do you think we got him?" I asked, fervently hoping that we had; for, while human life is theoretically sacred, it is quite a different matter when the gentleman whom it animates is trying his best to deprive you of yours.

"I sure hope so," Dinny replied. "Anyway I'll bet he's a durn sight more careful."

There was no more shooting from that particular clump of bushes, but a few moments afterward a shot came from the right of it, where there was an old, uprooted windfall. But from there the hawk-eyed marksman, whoever he was, had lost his pet target, the chink between the rocks.

Soon the firing ceased altogether. The afternoon passed and night came.

"If they come swarmin' in on us," said Toft, "a little light would be handy. There's kerosene for that lantern of your'n. I'll just keep it handy to douse onto a sack rolled around a rock. Touch that off and fire it out in front and they'd be in the light and we wouldn't."

Among other plunder which I considered quite superfluous Mr. Fothergill had brought a lantern and a big can of oil. Now it seemed likely to come in handy. Dunleath and Pack had the first

watch, and after that Toft and Fothergill. They told me to sleep, and I was quite ready to do so. I rolled up in a blanket, curled down in the lee of a rock, and knew no more till I was shaken hard. I started up.

"Quiet, Bob!" said Toft's voice. "I guess they're comin'. Keep down low, and shoot low when you have to."

I made sure that my magazine was full, and found myself crouching beside Jim Dunleath.

"How are the nerves, Bob?" he asked in a whisper.

"Pretty jumpy," I confessed. "But I'll be all right when she starts."

"Of course you will. I'm shaky myself. Always was, before anything big. It's good to be a little high-strung. You can go further on your nerve if you can get it working. But this is a new game to me. Bob"—he hesitated for a moment—"Bob, if anything happens to me I'd want Peggy to know about how I felt toward her—you understand?"

"That you wanted to marry her, you mean? Sure. I'll tell her—if I get through myself and you don't."

"That's the idea. Only not just that alone. Tell her that I loved her—a lot—and used to talk to you about her and make plans for the future."

"When did we do that?" I asked densely.

"We didn't. But that sort of thing helps a woman at times. And take good care of her. She's to have my share of the furs. I've told Fothergill."

"Quit talkin'!" hissed Dinny. "Listen!"

At first I could hear nothing but the pound of the blood in my ears. But as I listened intently I could catch faint sounds—an occasional cracking of twigs or low grate of displaced stones.

"Get ready!" Toft whispered. "I won't touch off the flare till they rush."

What happened immediately after that has always been so confused that in all the intervening years I have never been able to sort it out clearly in my mind, in spite of the fact that my own part in it was exceedingly short.

Toft's rifle stabbed the darkness with a ten-foot lance of flame. Momentarily it lit up a narrow lane walled with black. At the farther end of it a man crouched, with stubbly cheeks and working jaws and eyes fierce as a beast of prey's, and I knew him for Nootka Charlie. His rifle flamed in answer. The night was streaked by swift lines of fire, rent by shots and oaths, and through the din of the fight there came a sudden, high-pitched scream.

Of my brief part I can say but little. Forget-

ting caution I was on my feet emptying my rifle at those streaks of flame which momentarily outlined figures. A form, giantlike in the darkness, sprang up in front of me, and I jammed my rifle muzzle against it and pulled trigger, only to hear the hammer click with sickening emptiness. The next moment it was wrenched from my hands. And the next thing the world collided with the sun, or the other way about. At any rate I lost my grip on things material, and fell a long way through space into outer and utter darkness.

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP

I SUPPOSE I should thank Heaven for a thick head. I came back to the world of living men with a most infernal throbbing in it, pain in my eyes and an evil taste in my mouth. In my ears there was a mumble of voices, and as my head cleared I listened to a jangle of vivid blasphemy.

But the voices were not those of my friends; nor was I behind the rock barricade, but being carried, jolted along on somebody's shoulder as if I had been a sack of flour. The shoulder beneath me was vast, and when I heard a rumbled French execration I knew that Louis Beef was my bearer.

Behind us came two men with something between them which sagged toward the ground. Even in the darkness I could see that it was the body of a man, horribly inert, the arms trailing, the legs forked on either side of the leading bearer. Behind them were other men, stumbling and cursing in the darkness. And by their language, as my scattered wits gathered themselves, I knew that the attack had been a failure.

But in a few minutes we came to their camp, where Nootka's klootch was squatting by the fire, feeding it to a blaze. Louis dumped me down with little ceremony, and turned my face toward the light. But I kept my eyes closed. He ran his thick fingers around my throbbing head, and under them I felt for the first time a very big and long and sore lump.

"Bagosh," said he, "I guess mebbe I hit dat kid purty hard."

"Not half hard enough," Hayes snarled. "I wish you'd killed him. It was his snoopin' that botched everything."

"Take a look over here at Jordan," said Conover's voice. "He don't seem to be breathin'."

There was a short pause.

"I sh'd say he wasn't breathin'," said Hayes. "He's got his. He's dead."

"God!" ejaculated Conover, in tones of awe.

"Well, didn't you never see a dead man before?" sneered Hayes. "He's meat, that's all, same as I'll be some day, and you, and all the rest of us."

"Of course, that's so," Conover replied rather shakily. "Yes, that's so. Still, it don't seem possible. Bill Jordan! I wisht we'd kept out of this."

"I wish you had, too," Hayes snarled. "You young fellers ain't got the nerve of fawns. You

wish you'd kept out of it, do you? Well, you're in it now, up to your neck. I guess there's one dead man back there to play even for Jordan, and that means we've got to wipe out the whole bunch. We'd have done it and had it over by now, if you fellers hadn't weakened."

"Is dat so?" rumbled Louis with bitter irony. "What you do so moch yourself, hey? I don't see you on dat front row ce soir, Jackstraws. I guess, bagosh, you tak' plentee care of your dam ol' hide, an' Siwash George, too."

"You're a liar!" snapped Siwash George. "I was right up with the rest of you!"

"You were not," McGregor contradicted him. "At the first shot you lay down."

"What?" roared the old squaw man in a truly terrifying voice.

"You lay down like a yellow dog!" McGregor stated flatly.

"No man can talk to me like that!" the other blustered.

"And what," asked McGregor coldly, reverting as he always did when angry to the idiom and accent of his Gaelic forefathers, "and what will you pe toing apout it?"

It was evident that their nerves were raw, quivering with defeat and disappointment; and when I opened my eyes cautiously to peep at

them, I saw that physical soreness was added to it.

McGregor had a dirty rag, stained with blood, around his head. Louis' black poll was matted with blood and a dried trickle of it ran down his cheek. Ballou's left arm was bandaged. And Nootka Charlie stood stripped to the waist, his beautiful torso gleaming in the firelight, while his squaw washed a red furrow along his ribs. Their reception had been warmer than they had anticipated, and luck had gone against them. And so they snarled at each other across the dead man; but with the exception of Conover, none seemed to give him a second thought. Certainly none of the old-timers did. Being dead he ceased; it was as if he had never been. But Ballou took a hand.

"You may as well quit damnin' each other," he said. "The main thing is that they made good. They stood us off. Nobody's to blame for it, special. When they throwed that flare, them bein' behind the rocks where we couldn't see them, there wouldn't have been two of us left if we hadn't taken cover. There was no use tryin' it again, with them organized the way they were."

Nootka Charlie cursed his squaw for some twinge her fingers gave him. "What are we goin' to do about it?" he asked, over his shoulder.

"We'll see to-morrow," Ballou replied. Suddenly

his eye met mine. "Hallo, Bob!" he said. "Foxing again, hey?"

"I can't help being here, can I?" I said.

"Well, no, I guess you can't," he admitted. He eyed me for a moment. "By——" he said heavily, "it looks to me like that kid is a hoodoo. He's got as many lives as a black cat."

"Bagosh dat's right!" Louis agreed. "I dunno 'bout dat hoodoo, but for dose life—oui! I bust hees gun over hees head, an' she don' do not'ing but raise leetle lomp."

"And I missed him once back on them lakes," said Nootka, looking at me as one might scan a target, "and I was holdin' right between his shoulders. I'd have bet fifty dollars on the shot."

"I hadn't no better luck last night," Hayes complained. "He got through my smoke. Course, that was guesswork, though."

"It was him," said Ballou, "that lifted our canoes. Fothergill told me."

Inwardly I cursed Fothergill. I felt that I was unpopular enough without that; and Hayes' next words confirmed it.

"What are we goin' to do with him?" he asked. "Are we goin' to pack him around with us? My tumtum is to tie him up and pitch him in the river."

"Mine too," Nootka agreed, eying me evilly.

"After to-night we got to clean up the whole bunch."

Ballou's cold eye rested on me, and in that moment I experienced the sensations of a man charged with a capital offense, waiting for sentence.

"Bah!" said Louis, "he's only kid!"

"He's as bad as any of 'em," Nootka maintained. "He can talk, can't he. Do you want to be run down by them police and hanged, or get life if you miss that?"

"We'll see," Ballou decided, "and it'll depend a good bit on himself."

They hobbled my feet and tied my hands. And then they gave me a blanket and let me roll myself up as best I could. In spite of my aching head I slept heavily, not waking till the sunshine struck my face. And even then I was so tired and sore and disgusted that I was reluctant to face realities. But there was a muffled thumping and now and then a sharp clank of metal on stone, and I sat up to see what it was about.

They were burying Bill Jordan. The sounds I had heard were the digging of his grave. They rolled him up in his blanket and dropped him into the shallow excavation. For a moment they stood looking down. Conover's was the only face

which expressed any emotion. Jordan had been his chum.

"Well," said Hayes, "fill her up."

They paid no attention to me, beyond casting off my ties, but Nootka's klootch cooked my breakfast. The crack on the head had not destroyed my appetite, and, while I was eating, the whole crew, with the exception of Nootka, picked up their rifles and disappeared. Later, a couple of shots told me that my friends were still holding the fort.

Presently Nootka tied my elbows behind me and made me fast to a tree with a generous length of picket rope.

"I guess you'll stay put," he said. "I wish you'd try to get loose. I've told the klootch to crack you in the head with an ax if you try it."

"You're taking an awful chance!" I sneered.

"Not a chance," he told me. "You'd better remember your only show to live to grow whiskers is to be mighty careful of what you do from now on."

"You're a skookum tumtum bunch—not!" I said rashly. "You'd better be careful yourself. Bill Jordan's beef and planted, and some more of you will be. I wish I had a gun and was loose. I'll bet I'd make you hunt your hole."

"You would, hey?" he said, his lips lifting at the corners like a dog's.

"You bet I would!" I cried hotly, and entirely forgetting prudence. "I never knew a squaw man that wasn't yellow!"

In return for that injudicious gibe he hit me an open-handed swat that drove me reeling against the tree.

"Go ahead," he invited. "Tell me some more!"

But though I was nearly bursting with mad fury I had sense enough to hold my tongue. And after cursing me he left me.

By and by I asked the klootch for a drink, and she brought it, holding the cup to my lips. I thanked her for the water.

"S'pose I mamook klatawa," I asked to see if she would talk, "you stop me?"

She stared at me with her black eyes, and suddenly flashed her teeth in a smile.

"S-u-ure!" she drawled. "But you no klatawa."

"You speak English!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"Me miss'on girl."

She meant that she had been to mission school.

"Where? What mission?"

But she only smiled and shook her head.

"Sia-ah," she replied, meaning that it was some far-off one.

"If you are a mission girl you wouldn't hit me with an ax, would you?"

"Su-u-ure!" she nodded. "Challie, him tell me."

That seemed to settle the matter in her mind. Anyway, I had no hope of loosening his knots.

"How long have you been married?" I asked, putting it that way out of politeness.

"Tenas ahnkuttie—little while," she replied.

"Any papoose stop?" I asked.

She smiled again, and shook her head.

"You mind your dam biz-ness," she said, but she was not at all offended.

"What is your name?"

"Miss'on name Lucille." She eyed me for a moment. "You kloshe tenas man," she announced, meaning that I was a good-looking boy.

I knew that I was a black, surly-looking young devil, but if she thought otherwise I was not going to contradict her.

"You're a pretty girl," I told her on general principles, because it always pays to be polite, especially to savage ladies who have instructions to hand it to you with an ax. She smiled at me.

"Hyas kloshe!" she said, and patted my cheek, her face close to mine.

Just then, looking past her, I saw or thought I saw something or somebody move deep in the brush which surrounded the camp. I suppose my expression changed, for Lucille turned swiftly.

"What you see?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I answered, for I was really not sure whether it was imagination or not.

But Lucille seemed disturbed. She kept eying me and the bush, as nervous as a doe when the wind blows tainted. My personal appearance ceased to interest her; and she would talk no more.

That day, so far as I could tell, there was no attack on my friends. Nootka and his partners and old Hayes came in; and I think Lucille told the former her trouble, whatever it was, for he laughed and shook his head and patted her on the shoulder. He turned me loose, and I was that much better off, but I knew better than to make a break. Nothing, I think, would have suited Hayes and Nootka better. I noticed that the latter kept his rifle within reach of his hand.

About sunset the others returned. The breed's shoulder was ripped by a bullet, which seemed to have caught him lengthways as he was lying in cover, at least that was how it looked to me. They were all in bad humor, sore, impatient, snappy with each other. Evidently the siege was not turning out as they expected. After they had eaten they smoked in surly silence, and finally Hayes said:

"Tom, we ain't goin' at this right. They way they're organized they can stand us off. They won't waste their ca'tridges, and we're low on

ammynition right now. We got to change our system."

"Maybe," Ballou admitted.

"We have," the older man insisted. "We ought to put the kid in play ag'in' them furs."

I stared at him, wondering what he meant.

"I don't like to do that," Ballou replied.

"Maybe you don't," Hayes came back, "but the rest of us have some say in it. And me and George and Nootka think it's the only thing to do."

"How do you mean—'put him in play?'" asked young Conover.

"There's diff'rent ways," the old rascal replied. "We can send 'em word that if they don't give up the furs the kid will have sorter a hard time."

"You couldn't bluff them like that. They wouldn't believe it."

"Who said it was a bluff?" Hayes demanded. "And about believin' it, they would if they found his ear or a couple of joints of a finger settin' in a split stick in front of 'em in the mornin'."

For a moment nobody spoke. The villainous suggestion made my flesh creep, and a cold fear laid hold of my stomach. I looked for a general horrified protest, but such as came was not nearly general enough, nor, except from Conover, was it emphatic.

"I ain't lak dat moch," said Louis. "Mebbe she don' work."

"I won't stand for it!" Conover declared.

"You got so much to say!" sneered Hayes.

"I've got as much as you," Conover retorted. "Mac won't either, will you, Mac?"

"I would not want to cut off his ears," said McGregor; "but if——"

"We wouldn't need to do that," Hayes interrupted. "Nitche done the like once. But if we just sent 'em word, and took a hot iron and started the kid to hollerin' where they could hear him the play would win. Course, if he wanted to howl without bein' hurt it would be all the better for him. If they didn't give up the furs they'd come out to rescue him, and that would give us a chance at them."

I saw it then, of course. If I would deceive my friends well and good. If not I might expect the hot iron. And then, if I could not stand the gaff, I knew that Hayes' forecast would come true.

"That sounds all right," said Ballou. "That way it's up to Bob, mostly. We might do that, hey, Louis?"

"Sure, dat's all right," Louis agreed. "If he's holler plentee he don' get hurt; if he ain't holler, why den we mak' heem, dat's all. Oui! Bon! What you t'ink, Bob, hey?"

I suppose it would have been heroic to have defied them; but I did not feel heroic, and I was learning wisdom in a hard school.

"I don't want to get hurt," I said sulkily, and Hayes grinned.

"Mighty few people do. What did I tell you?"

The klootch Lucille sat apart from the men as usual. She had no theories of equality, no idea of obtruding herself. I do not think she understood all the conversation, but she got at least part of it. I caught her eye, and the glance seemed to carry some meaning. She moved her head slightly to one side. In a moment she did so again. I wondered what it could mean, if, indeed, it meant anything. Suddenly it flashed upon me that she wanted me to change my position. So I got up, moved a little farther from the fire and sat down.

I watched the squaw. Presently she rose and came toward me. As she passed she opened her hand. A small penknife lay in the palm. Her fingers closed again on it. She gathered an armful of wood somewhere behind me, and came back with it. Close beside me she let half a dozen sticks fall, and stooped to pick them up. As she did so something struck my moccasin.

"You mamook cut rope to-night," she whispered. "You klatawa!"

When she had recovered her wood I got the little knife. The men were turning in. They set no guard on their own camp, but one of them—McGregor it was—went to watch ours, which served the purpose just as well. Nootka hobbled my feet, and having permitted me to roll up in the blanket, tied my hands in front of me and then took a turn of the rope around my body, which made it quite impossible for me to untie anything.

Having made me secure, as he thought, he went to his own blankets beside the klootch, a little distance away on the other side of the fire. Like the rest they slept in the open, without cover or privacy, on a litter of boughs and browse which Lucille had scratched together.

I had a long wait before everybody slept. One or another seemed restless, though I do not suppose conscience had anything to do with it. At last all was quiet, and I got the little knife from beneath me in the blankets where I had dropped it before my hands were tied, and set to work. Though the little blade was edged like a razor I had a hard job freeing my hands. But when that was done I slashed through my hobbles in short order.

Being loose I raised myself cautiously, to look around and listen before making a break for freedom.

The fire was down to coals, but the night was clear and the stars bright. Everybody seemed asleep. In the stillness I could catch the different notes of breathing. I slid halfway out of my blanket, and then I paused.

Over near Nootka Charlie and Lucille was a black shape which I did not remember. I was sure that there was neither log, stump, nor bush there. As I looked, it moved, soundlessly, closer to the two sleepers. Something or somebody was crawling belly down, like a mountain lion, upon them. But it could not be a lion or any other animal, for none—except perhaps an idiotic porky—would venture into camp; and the father of all porcupines was not as big as this dark intruder. Could it be Toft or Pack, taking a long chance to see what had become of me? If so I could not signal without the danger of waking somebody. I could only wait. I sunk lower in my blanket.

But now the night prowler had reached the sleepers. It crouched beside them, hanging over them like a spirit of evil omen, squat, minatory, sinister, bending low as if to catch the sound of their breathing.

At that moment the coals of the fire settled and a brief flame shot up, casting a swift flare. By it I could see that the intruder was a man. A shadowy arm swung up, and the firelight gleamed

on something in his hand. Then the arm swept down, and immediately the night silence of the sleeping camp was gone.

I could hear the deep, animal grunt of the man as he struck, the sodden chuck of the knife as it went home through the blanket, driven with all the power of that shadowy arm, and the screaming cry of the victim as the steel reft the fibers of him, plucking him momentarily from sleep but to hurl him into a deeper and longer one.

Grunt! Chuck! Death cry!

Again they came, as the murderer swung his arm and stabbed and stabbed, and with them mingled a woman's scream of terror, changing swiftly to a shriek of pain and despair.

CHAPTER XXII

MY GET-AWAY

WITH the scream of the squaw mingled a whirl of oaths from the aroused sleepers. They fought their blankets wildly to get clear of them, grasping for weapons to repel they knew not what.

A dark form, still half-crouching, made for the bush in swift, stealthy bounds which seemed to halt or limp a little, but were yet light as a bob-cat's.

Bang! Hayes' gun barked, and Ballou and Siwash George shot into the darkness. But the shots had no effect as far as I could see. The shadowy form vanished.

Old Siwash George rushed across to where his partner had bedded. He bent, and straightened, with a very geyser of blasphemy spouting from his lips.

"Fetch a light!" were his first coherent words. "Somebody's got Charlie and the klootch! Knifed 'em! Charlie! Who done it, Charlie?"

But Nootka Charlie would never speak again. Strange, horrible, whistling noises issued from his

throat, and he writhed, and his knees drew up and relaxed.

Siwash George spoke to the squaw in her tongue. Evidently he was asking the same question. But she shook her head and sagged against Louis' supporting arm.

"Bagosh," said the latter, "dat klootch she's go mimoluse, too, for sure!"

Old George cursed afresh.

"Shut up dat!" Louis told him. "She bring dam bad luck for swear where dere's dead people."

"Bad luck!" Conover echoed. "What else have we had? There's Charlie and his woman dead, and poor Billy Jordan, too. And what have we got? Not a thing. I'm sick of this! I'm through!"

"Through, are you?" Hayes snarled. "No one's through unless the bunch is. No quitters. Try to quit and you'll trail up Nootka and Jordan, you hear me! George, who got Nootka? You ought to have some idee."

"Oh, I got an idee all right," the old squaw man replied. "I guess it was her husband."

"Had a husband, had she?" said Ballou.

"Sure. I told Charlie he'd better let her alone, but he seemed stuck on her. I had a notion he killed the buck, but I guess he didn't. Now he's got his. And I ain't sure that the buck ain't out for me, too."

"I wouldn't wonder a durn bit," Hayes agreed. "I'd be plumb careful, if I was you." Siwash George swore. "What's the name of this buck?"

"Ignace Stone—calls himself Ignace Mountain. He belongs over on the Smokey."

"He'll be bad, hey?" Louis queried.

"Bad?" echoed Siwash George. "Oh, no, he ain't bad. This don't look like it, does it? He's plumb gentle—like a crazy wolf! Look at poor old Charlie. He socks that knife to him up to the haft every crack!"

So that was the mission of the lame Indian, ostensibly looking for trapping ground! For months probably—it was hard to say how long—he had been on the trail of Nootka Charlie and his faithless wife. Well, he had found them, partly, I reflected, through my agency. But then he would have done so sooner or later anyway.

"I can tell you one thing," old Siwash George was saying; "I dunno if that buck's out to get me or not; but I'm sure out to get him. I'll play even for Charlie, and feel a lot safer besides."

I had watched and listened, fascinated, forgetting for the moment that I should have seized the opportunity to make my own get-away. But it was not yet too late. They were paying no attention to me, clustered around the dead, their light being the stump of a candle. And so I slid

cautiously out of my blankets, got a tree between us in a few seconds, and stole into the gloom.

From the racket I heard before I had gone a hundred yards I knew that my escape had been discovered. I stayed where I was so as to give no clew to my whereabouts; and presently I heard two or more go by in the general direction I had intended to go. Plainly their intention was to cut me off from my outfit if I had not already rejoined it. With daylight they would hunt for me, a beautiful prospect, considering that I had no weapons. However, I had good legs and eyes and ears. I made up my mind that I would not go far, but await an opportunity to get through, and until I got my bearings with some degree of certainty it would be folly to attempt to run the blockade which I was quite sure was now established against me. And so I put a half mile between me and the camp I had quitted, and curled up in a hollow and shivered like a dog to keep warm.

At last dawn came, dim, gray, so gradual that it was impossible to say when night merged into day.

A squirrel on a limb just above my head suddenly exploded in a chattering frenzy, abusing me frightfully in his own tongue, his whole body and stiffly upright brush jerking violently with each

vocal spasm. Another, a hundred yards away, seemed to take his remarks as personal, and replied. A flicker began to tap, and a few little, black-headed juncos and an occasional modest-coated wren hopped in the bushes. Crows passed noisily overhead. With faint, underfoot rustlings an old cock grouse appeared from nowhere a few feet away, and suddenly glimpsing me, stood like a statue for some minutes before, with stealthy steps, he got a bush between him and the danger, and vanished thankfully about his business.

With the daylight I started on a reconnaissance, and at last I got to a place from which I could see the rocks which protected my friends. Of the latter I could see nothing. But there was smoke, so that I knew all was well with them, and I longed for a share of the breakfast which they were no doubt eating.

At first I could see nothing of the besiegers, but I was not to be fooled by that. And presently I located one of them in a tangle of bushes in front of me. That settled it. It would be impossible to run the gantlet by day. Therefore there was no use lingering there.

I went back in the direction from which I had come, to seek some place where I could lie up safely. If possible I wished to find some spot like the butte on which Ignace Mountain and I

had lain on that afternoon back at the lakes, from which I could see without being seen. I wondered if the Indian's vengeance was complete, or if he was after Siwash George, also. The latter had declared himself after the Indian, but I did not see how he was going about it, and regarded it as a bluff.

And then, suddenly, I saw the old squaw man himself through the brush less than two hundred yards away. He was moving very slowly, very quietly on a course converging with my own. He had a rifle tucked under his arm and was plainly still-hunting for somebody. If he had glanced my way he must have seen me as plainly as I saw him, but he was looking principally at the ground, as though it gave him information.

Twenty feet away lay a huge spruce, snapped off near the root by some gale, and this afforded concealment if I could make it. With my eyes on the old squaw man I backed toward it swiftly, put my hand on it and vaulted for cover. But instead of alighting on the ground I came down on a living body.

My first thought was that I had jumped on a bear; but the next instant I knew it was a man. My instinctive, startled yell was shut off in my throat by a grip that made my mouth open and my eyes bulge, an arm like a wire hawser wrapped

itself around the small of my back with a jerking constriction that seemed to yank the stiffening clean out of my spine, I was whirled over on my back, the binding arm released me, and I looked up helplessly past the blade of a nine-inch buffalo knife into the fierce, twisting face and blazing eyes of Ignace Mountain.

I just shut my own eyes after that first glance and waited, absolutely sure that the next instant would bring me what Nootka Charlie had got. I expected to feel that big, raw-gray blade driving through my breast, and unconsciously I stiffened to meet the shock of it.

But it did not come, and I opened my eyes. The Indian was peering over the top of the log, and then he ducked his head down and the pressure on my windpipe relaxed.

"Halo noise!" he whispered, and the knife menaced me. "S'pose you mamook holla you go mimoluse!"

Since noise, or to "holler," was the last thing I wanted, even without the knife argument, I lay very still. And presently, after a long look over the log, he lowered the knife though he still knelt astride me.

"What you mamook?" he demanded.

"Nika ipsoot—I was trying to hide," I explained.

"Him nanitch for you?" he asked nodding after Siwash George.

"For you, maybe. I guess he'd shoot either of us."

The Indian smiled grimly and got off my body.

"S'pose him no find, no shoot," he said, and leaned back against the log with a sigh, as if he were glad to do it.

When I sat up I saw that a blood-soaked cloth was tied around his left thigh. Evidently one bullet had found him. He had tied up the wound, tearing off his shirt sleeve for a bandage, but he must have lost a great deal of blood. Perhaps Siwash George had seen bloodstains on the ground and was looking for more, which would account for his not seeing me.

"You got hurt," I said, stating the obvious for want of a more original idea.

"Yas, little bit," he replied, and eyed me as if making up his mind whether to tell me more or not. "You savvy plenty," he decided, nodding at me. "Nootka Challie him go mimoluse. You savvy why me kill him?"

"Yes, they said the woman was your wife."

"My 'ooman," he said somberly. "They kopswalla klatawa—run away together. So me kill um." He seemed to consider this explanation quite suffi-

cient, and I suppose it was. Many white men have done the same thing.

"Siwash George is afraid you will kill him, too."

"Ah-hah!" he said noncommittally, and let it go at that.

Possibly I should have felt horror and repulsion in the presence of a double murderer. But as a matter of fact I felt none at all. I knew the Indian code of reprisal which permits any way of playing even. Ignace had done merely what by the custom and tradition of his people he had a perfect right to do—what, in fact, it was his duty to do—and Nootka and the woman had been quite aware of that. I was sorry about the woman, but not about Nootka. Anyway, they were dead, and here was their slayer lying wounded like a stricken animal which crawls away to lick its hurts.

"Can you walk?" I asked.

"Some. Halo skookum now. Bimeby all right. What you do?"

I told him my intentions, learning his in return. His canoe was cached several miles downstream. When night came he would go to it and get food. Until then he would rest. He accepted conditions quietly, adapting himself to them. Looking around I could not see his rifle.

"No more rifle stop," he replied to my question. "Hiyu no good. Him mamook bust."

As it turned out, the mainspring had broken and he had nothing to make another. His sole weapon was his knife. This no doubt had delayed his vengeance. I marveled at the nerve which had made him stick to his errand in spite of this misfortune.

But suddenly he seemed to stiffen like a dog on a point, and made a warning gesture. He raised his head cautiously above the fallen tree, and I followed his example.

Siwash George was coming back. This time he was much nearer to us. He walked bent-kneed, after the fashion of the old woodsman, stepping softly, his rifle loosely under his arm so that a twitch of the muscles would throw it into position, and his course would bring him almost upon us.

I did not know what to do. Against that old wolf with his rifle we seemed quite powerless. He would certainly shoot the Indian, and possibly me. If I had been alone I would have made a run for it and trusted to dodging the lead that I knew would follow. The Indian seemed to interpret my thoughts.

"Halo run!" he whispered, shaking his head. "Him too dam good shot."

"He'll kill you, sure," I returned.

He nodded, frowning. He accepted that fact, as he did others. But instead of panic his mind was concentrated on avoiding that outcome.

"Mebbe fool him," he said swiftly. "S'pose him see us you stand up. You say me near dead, you savvy. You say you find me. You say me bleed bad. S'pose you get chance you catch him gun. You savvy?"

"Yes," I said.

He leaned against the log and let his head droop forward wearily. His mouth partially opened, his lower lip hung loose, and his eyes, half closed, lack-luster, stared straight ahead. It was a consummate mimicry of utter exhaustion, helplessness and despair. But the haft of the big knife lay in the palm of his right hand, and the blade was concealed behind his sinewy forearm.

"You look," he instructed. "S'pose him come anyway you stand up and holla."

I peeped over the log. Siwash George was very near. As I looked he hesitated, turned, and came directly toward the log. I stood up. As if my action had found a reflex in his muscles his rifle covered me instantly.

"Got ye!" he said. "Don't make a move, young feller, or I'll sure drill ye."

"I'm not making any," I replied. "I saw you coming, and I could have got away if I had wanted to. Come on. I've got the Indian here."

"What!" he cried. "No monkey business, young feller!"

"He was shot making his get-away," I said. "He's been bleeding badly. I guess he's about all in."

He stepped forward cautiously, his rifle ready, and came around the end of the log. As he saw the Indian he grinned in unholy satisfaction.

"I guess that's right. If he ain't all in he will be."

"He's been bleeding like a stuck buck," I told him. "I guess the bullet cut an artery."

I stooped over the Indian, and he came close, but with his rifle still ready for business.

"So, you bloody Siwash," he said, "you'd knife Charlie in his blankets, would you! I got a notion to burn you alive. Oh, you can hear me, all right!" And he poured a swift flood of some tribal tongue at him.

Ignace's eyelids flickered, and the lax mouth quivered weakly. "Hyas sick!" he muttered, and his head dropped lower.

In a sudden, frightful gust of rage old Siwash George forgot prudence. He stepped forward and kicked the Indian in the face.

"Sick, are ye?" he roared. "Kill my partner, would ye? Well, you'll go to hell knowin' who sent ye!"

Just for an instant the rifle hung at the length of his right arm, his hand forward of the trigger. I flung myself at it like a starving wolf at a caribou's hamstrings. As my hands closed on barrel and stock with a desperate grip Ignace Mountain came alive. His limp body whipped forward with the quickness of a striking snake, and the big knife drove straight at Siwash George's stomach.

But the old squaw man jumped back just beyond the thrust, dragging me with him, wrenching furiously to break my hold on the weapon, to which I clung like a puppy to a root. He swung me between himself and the Indian. Ignace struck at him over my shoulder, but again he saved himself, though the blade ripped his shirt diagonally across his chest. In avoiding it he let go with one hand. Before he could get a grip again I worked the old stick-twisting trick on him, bearing down with one hand and levering up with the other with my shoulder beneath it, and as my arms crossed, his hold broke. Somehow he must have touched the trigger, and of course the weapon was cocked. It exploded, muzzle to the sky, and the next in-

stant the Indian was past me and at him with the knife.

Dinny Pack maintains still that the old squaw man was yellow at bottom; but I did not see any sign of it then. Of course he was fighting for his life, and even a mouse will do that. He had neither knife nor six-shooter, and he met the Indian with his bare fists. I don't think he would have lasted five seconds if Ignace had been himself, but the latter had lost much blood and his leg bothered him. Old George dodged and hit, and hit and dodged, trying to keep out of range of the big blade that licked out venomously for his life; and he might have succeeded if he had not partially tripped over a bush. As it was, he caught Ignace's knife hand, and then they locked and wrestled in a whirl of smashing bushes and flying leaves until they went down, with the white man on top.

Meantime I had levered a cartridge into the chamber of the rifle. But they were turning and twisting so fast that I could not shoot without a chance of hitting the wrong man. Anyway I had a natural disinclination to kill a man by shooting him in the back. And so when they fell, and Siwash George came on top I just cracked him back of the ear with the heavy, octagon barrel.

I put plenty of power into the swing, and he toppled over like a sack of oats. Ignace raised himself on one arm and poised his knife for an instant.

"Hold on!" I cried. "Don't kill him!"

"Hiyu kill him!" he gasped. "Him try to kill me, mebbe kill you."

"No, no!" I insisted. "Don't. Maybe he's dead now. I hit him hard enough."

"Mamook make dam sure!" he replied grimly. "Kill Nootka Challie, kill him, make-um job—mamook kopet—all same clean-up! S'pose him go mimoluse then no more trouble stop!"

But I got in between him and the unconscious man, and finally, grumbling that I was a fool, he put up his knife. I went through Siwash George and found only a dozen cartridges. But as I was congratulating myself on capturing his artillery Ignace caught me by the arm.

"Look!" he said. "Tenas hiyu man come!"

I looked. As he had said, several men were coming. I could see them indistinctly through the screen of the brush. Then, as one of them showed more plainly for an instant, I recognized Hayes. Of course they had heard the shot, and were looking for the shooter. Likely they knew that old Siwash George was somewhere in the vicinity. Anyway it was no place for us.

"We hyak klatawa!" I said. "Get out of here quick before they see us."

"Kill him first," he said.

"No, no, don't kill him. No time now."

"All right," he acquiesced reluctantly, "kill him some time. Now we klatawa."

Crouching low, taking advantage of every bit of cover, we retreated as swiftly as we could; but unfortunately, just as we were close to good concealment in the form of thick cottonwoods, we were seen. There was a yell behind us.

"Mamook run!" said Ignace.

We dived into the cottonwoods. Looking back we could see three men, spreading out as they came after us. There was no opportunity to double or to throw them off. We had the choice of going straight ahead or facing the music. So we went ahead at our best speed, which of course was regulated by Ignace's wounded leg.

What surprised me was that our pursuers gained very little. Nor did they shoot at us, though they must have had opportunity. They chased us noisily, yelling to one another, to keep in touch I suppose. I knew then about what a deer must feel when the wolves are after it in the deep of the winter snows.

At the end of half a mile Ignace began to give

out. His leg was bleeding again, his breath came in gasps, and he staggered a little.

"Halo skookum, me!" he panted. "You go—you hyak cooley!"

But I would not leave him like that. I helped him as well as I could. And suddenly the trees thinned out in front of us. There, in plain view, was the rocky hill where Jim Dunleath and the others should be holding the fort. If we could only make that! If only there was a run left in the Indian!

But as I hurried him along, with his weight growing heavier and heavier upon me, the shouts from behind were answered from in front. And then, and not till then, I realized that we had been driven very neatly into a trap.

CHAPTER XXIII

ROUNDED UP

IGNACE MOUNTAIN saw it as soon as I; but his practical mind worked faster than mine. Close at hand was an outcrop of broken rock grown around with stunted fir saplings, low and bushy, and he turned for it without hesitation, with the instinct for cover of a hunted animal. We went into it like a brace of hard-run foxes going to earth. Ignace simply collapsed and lay panting. I was winded, too, not from running, for I could have kept going half a day at that gait, but from helping him. But as the low branches swished to behind me I dropped down and peered back, and thanked the Lord for old Siwash George's .45-70.

It was Hayes, Conover and the breed who had chased us. They had joined forces in the shelter of another patch of brush. And behind them, as I looked, came old Siwash George himself in a staggery jog trot, and I could imagine the language he was using.

Our sheltering thicket was not more than a hundred feet through in any direction, and was one of several, scattered irregularly like islands, a few

hundred yards apart, the spaces between being patched with short growths of saskatoons, soap berry and brier. I crept through to the farther side. As I had feared, there was the rest of the outfit—Ballou and Louis and McGregor. There was no running that gantlet. All we could do was to make a stand. And I cursed old Siwash George because he had not packed more cartridges.

Presently Ballou circumnavigated our position, giving it a very wide berth, and no doubt he joined Hayes, though I had lost sight of that gentleman. Shortly afterward they began a general advance, picking cover carefully, working in under shelter of isolated clumps of trees. I wanted to blaze away at every bush that shook, but I knew I had no ammunition to waste. Beside me Ignace Mountain lay quietly resting. Whatever he felt found no expression in his face, and he did not suggest that I should let him handle the rifle.

"Something will happen in a minute," I said.

"Yas," he agreed. "S'pose him get close begin to shoot. Mebbe-so we go mimoluse this time."

I thought that very likely, and I certainly did not want to be shot.

"I'm scared," I admitted. "Halo skookum tum-tum, me! How about you, Ignace?"

He shook his head, smiling.

"Don't care," he said. "One time me have hyas

yutl tumtum—me hyas happy, me like to live. Long time ago. Now—no more! Me kill Nootka Challie. Good! Now me go mimoluse. All right."

No doubt the happy time he referred to had been before Nootka ran away with his wife. He seemed quite indifferent at the prospect of death, and he was entirely in earnest; though it did seem to me that killing two people was a poor preparation for eternity. But then Indians have their own ideas of things, including the hereafter; and the missionaries, though they mean well enough, have no more Christianized the Indian than they have the Chinese. An Indian may take the white man's God into his Pantheon, but he does not throw out the other gods and mysterious spirits of the land and water that his people have recognized for ages. In fact the Indian is a queer fish, and those who attribute to him childlike simplicity are as far astray as those who endow him with the cunning of the serpent. No white man really understands an Indian; and for the matter of that it is hard enough for us in this country to understand the whites of other countries.

A bullet ripped just above our heads, bringing down a shower of fir needles; and another threw up a spatter of dirt. I could see the smoke, but not the marksman, and I waited, husbanding my precious cartridges. Then, for an instant, beside

a stump among the bushes, I caught a glimpse of a man's body. It was hidden before I could draw a sight on it, but I covered the spot and waited. In a moment I saw it again. I caught the sight fair and touched the trigger. The old weapon bellowed, and my mark disappeared, but in a moment there it was again. Thinking I had perhaps overshot, not being familiar with the sights, I held lower and pulled more carefully. That time the bullet kicked dirt; and hastily, while I had the chance, I fired a third time, holding higher. The object moved quickly into the protection of the stump.

"You hit um?" Ignace queried.

"If I didn't I don't know why. I was dead on him."

But as I spoke there was a shot from that very spot. I was disgusted, for with my own rifle I could have put five out of six bullets into a playing card at that distance. How in blazes was this old gas pipe sighted, anyway? Or was the rifling worn so that it threw wild, or the ammunition bad? But the report was clean and hard, and there was a quick punch to the recoil, so that apparently the cartridges were all right and the twist still good.

As I peered out, lying very low, I saw my man's body again, but this time on the other side of the

stump. I could see almost half his body. He was keeping his head in cover like an ostrich. I drew the sight just outside the line of the stump.

"Halo shoot!" Ignace exclaimed swiftly. "Him hang coat on bush, shove him out. No man stop inside coat."

The man behind the stump had worked a trick on me ancient as gunpowder itself. I had wasted three precious shells. Well, it could not be helped, and I was relieved to know that the fault was not with the rifle. Thereafter my foxy stump artist exposed his coat in vain, and I think his experience with it made him respect my shooting, for he did not show himself, either.

But now they began to shoot us up systematically. Bullets buzzed and spatted and zipped. We lay flat, getting the best protection we could from the rock outcroppings, but it was more a matter of luck than anything else. They could not see us because of the screen of fir saplings, and that was our salvation.

Sullenly the firing ceased, and as I ventured to raise myself cautiously, there was a sharp exclamation from the Indian. I turned. Through the farther side of the thicket came Ballou, Hayes, and Siwash George. While the hot fire had engaged our attention they had crept up behind us within

rushing distance. Now they came at us like three old wolves.

Hayes raised his six-shooter and fired. I do not know whether he meant to kill me or merely intimidate me, but the bullet burnt my ear. I shot back without putting the rifle to my shoulder, and I think Providence must have directed that bullet for it got Hayes. I saw him leering evilly, triumphantly through the smoke of his gun as I pressed the trigger; and the next instant he was stumbling, pitching forward, the triumph in his face replaced by stupid amazement.

I threw the lever forward and yanked it back. To my horror the action jammed. Later, when I came to investigate, I found the empty shell caught by the breech block. That is a fault of that particular make of rifle. I am not going to say what make it is, because it is made to-day, and made with the same fault. Personally I would not be found dead with one; and I would expect to be if I used one.

If it had not been for the rifle jamming I would have got Ballou or he would have got me. As it was I could not shoot, and for reasons of his own he did not. I suppose he wanted to take me prisoner, following out the plan which my escape had upset.

"Get the Injun, George!" he cried. "The kid's mine!"

He pounced at me like an old fox for a young rabbit, and I don't think he expected much more trouble than the fox. But that was where he was wrong. Those of us who are getting along in years are continually making the same mistake of underestimating youth. Many a cunning, leathery old invincible has discovered when too late that the youngster in the opposite corner has the wind and the punch and the legs which more than offset experience. Not that I could have done very much if he had once got hold of me; but as his great, sinewy, old hand grabbed for me I ducked and dodged, and as I did so, I shoved the barrel of the useless rifle between his legs, so that he plunged forward like a landslide. But the jerk tore the weapon from my hands. I came up unarmed behind him, facing Ignace Mountain and Siwash George; and beyond them in the clear three hundred yards away, running toward us at top speed came Jim Dunleath and Dinny Pack with Fothergill and Toft trailing in the rear, helplessly outdistanced but straining to be in it too.

The old squaw man was just cutting down on the Indian with a six-shooter which he must have borrowed from somebody, for he had none when we left him. He was standing, legs wide apart,

flat-footed, taking his time, making a sure thing of it. Not a dozen feet separated them. The Indian was crouching, bent-kneed like a wrestler circling for an opening, his left arm extended, his right drawn back and around behind him. In the palm of that hand lay the big knife, the blade in a line with the fingers. But Siwash George could not see it at all.

"Shootin's too good for you!" he gritted. "You copper-hided murderer, I've a good notion to——"

Then it happened. The Indian's right leg straightened like the snap of a spring, throwing his entire weight on his left foot. His right arm swept forward, stopping suddenly at the waist line, while the shoulder rose in a tremendous jerk. The eye could scarcely follow the knife as it flew. All I saw was a blurred streak, and then I heard a "sput!" like the cut of the air beneath the wing of a frightened teal. And there stood Siwash George, wide-legged, flat-footed, gun in hand; but his head was back, and his mouth open for the air that would never be his to breathe, and the hilt of the buffalo knife was all that stood out from his throat.

Now this, which takes so long to tell, happened in no time at all, in fact before Ballou was on his feet again. He came up with a glare in his eyes like the old wolf that he was at heart. He saw Siwash George, and more than that, Jim Dunleath

and Pack coming, and he raised his rifle deliberately. For a moment the black ring covered me, and then shifted past me. I think he was going to get the Indian or perhaps Pack or Dunleath first. But just then there was the rush of feet and the crash of brush behind him, and Louis came through upon us. And Louis, instead of being the first of the crew from that side, was quite alone. He caught Ballou by the arm.

"Come 'long, Tom!" he cried. "Ron! We got for mak' dat get-away!"

"Run! What for?" Ballou demanded.

"For because dere's two canoe land wit' dem dam police!" Louis returned.

"We can stand 'em off!" snapped Ballou.

"Stand off not'ing!" roared Louis. "Are you go crazee? De boys, she's halfway on dat camp now. Me, I tak' beeg chance for tol' you. Stay an' bedam if you lak'." And so saying he plowed through the sweeping branches and was gone.

Just for a moment Ballou hung in the wind. I think he would have liked to shoot it out. The old, fierce blood of his youth had mounted to his brain. He put me in mind of an old wolf hemmed by hounds, snarling and full of fight, despising them and yet knowing that they must pull him down. His eye met mine for an instant and it cast the shadow of death. I know he was minded

to kill me, and the Indian, and as many more as he could.

And then prudence got the upper hand. No doubt it was the name of the police which decided him, for from the boundary to the arctic sea there is no mercy for the man who raises his hand against them, and neither refuge nor rest for the man whose trail they take. And Ballou knew it well.

"I guess you get them furs, Bob, after all!" he said almost in his ordinary manner. "You won't see me on the Carcajou no more. Help yourself to what there is in the shack. So long!"

The fir boughs parted and swished shut as he went through them with the long, running stride of a moose, and that was the last I ever saw of him. I stood there looking after him stupidly, as Jim Dunleath and Dinny Pack tore in at the other side of the little bluff.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE MOONLIGHT

"POLICE!" exclaimed Dinny Pack, as he eyed the four men who came toward us from the river. "Police nothin'! That big feller with the four-punch hat is Bill Rowan, and the short one is his partner, Joe Cass. It was them we was expectin' to find at the lakes. The other two is trappers—Bradley and White, their names is." And stepping out he hailed them.

Besides the four-punch hat, Rowan was wearing a ragged police tunic, his own coat, as we learned later, having been burned through carelessness in leaving it with a lighted pipe in the pocket. He had got the old police coat from an Indian, though how the latter had come by it was a mystery. Likely it was a discard which he had picked up. But this combination of hat and coat had been sufficient to stampede Ballou's outfit.

The four newcomers were hard and husky, and each carried a rifle. As soon as they heard our story they declared themselves.

"That bunch needs cleanin' up," said little Joe Cass, "and we're the boys to do it, hey, Bill?"

"Sure," big Rowan agreed. "We'll round 'em up if they ain't flew the coop. Whereabouts is this camp of theirs?"

"Bob knows," said Dinny. "Come on, Bob, here's where we play even."

I led the way, and Ignace Mountain, in spite of his wounded leg, hobbled with us. But when we reached the site of the camp, the fur thieves had gone in hasty flight in their canoes, whether up or down the stream it was impossible to say.

They had not buried Nootka Charlie and the squaw. They lay together, covered by a ragged blanket, and flies buzzed above their bodies. Toft twitched back the blanket and shook his head.

"Injun work!" he said. "Nootka was due to get his through some woman. It was comin' to him, I guess. But killin' the klootch, too, is pretty hard stuff."

"It's murder!" said Mr. Fothergill with a shudder. "I have no sympathy for the man. But a woman is a woman. It seems to me we should take this Indian and deliver him to justice."

"Well, an Injun looks at things his own way," said Toft, "and the woman was an Injun, too. When you live in this country for a while, among 'em, you get to look at things diff'rent. Law that works out where there's courts and such ain't always the same as justice up here. She's raw

country, and the nitches still settle things their own way. I dunno's the law improves things much when it does butt in. Let's see what he has to say."

He turned to Ignace Mountain, who stood quietly looking at the bodies.

"You killed this man and this woman?"

The Indian nodded.

"The woman was my wife. She ran away with the man."

"And so you killed her. That was not well, Ignace Mountain."

"She hyas mesachie klootchman," the Indian returned.

"Even if she was a bad woman," said Toft, "you should not have killed her. That is murder, and for murder men are hanged. It is in our minds to take you to be tried for it by the white man's law. What have you to say?"

Ignace Mountain looked from face to face, and read condemnation. He took a step forward and threw out his hand.

"She hyas mesachie klootchman," he repeated. "You no savvy. You listen: When we marry that 'ooman, me good man—me skookum, me walk straight, me have face all same other man. Me good hunter, take hiyu fur, plenty grub stop,

plenty clothes stop. Me give that 'ooman all she want, me hyas yutl tumtum then—hyas happy.

"Bimeby, one time, me wound bear and fight him with this knife. Me kill him, but me hurt bad. My face like this, my leg no good." He touched face and limb as he spoke with sinewy, nervous fingers. "For long time me hiyu sick. No hunt. Then no more grub stop, no more clothes stop. That 'ooman she look at me no more. All time she see my face she turn away. Her heart is changed. She is hard to me—no laugh, no smile. In my own teepee me all same kamooks—all same dog!

"Bimeby come Nootka Challie. Him big, him skookum. She smile at him, she laugh. All time him come to my teepee. Me nanitch—me watch. Bimeby, one night, she try to run away with him, but me stop her. Me no beat her—me talk good to her, me talk kind. But her heart is bad to me and she say many hard things. So me take her and go away—we go si-a-a-h—and make a camp on the Wabatanisk. Then me go hunt.

"Bimeby, one night, her heart is good to me again. Once more she talk and smile, and give me good muckamuck. Me eat. Pretty soon me sick. Me have hiyu pain, me lie down and roll and twist all same poisoned wolf, and then me lie all same dead. All time that 'ooman laugh at me,

and she call and Nootka Challie come, and they look at me and laugh, and she kiss him. Then they klatawa."

"Good Lord!" Dunleath exclaimed. "The woman gave him poison."

"Wolf bait, I guess," Toft agreed. "Was that it, Ignace?"

"Poison for wolf—yas," the Indian returned. "For long time me hiyu sick. Me lie like sick dog. Bimeby me mamook get up. Canoe gone; gun gone; blanket gone; grub gone. All gone. No fire stop, no match stop. Me klatawa, me eat berries and bark. Bimeby me find my people, bimeby get skookum again, bimeby get more canoe, get gun, get grub. And then me mamook nanitch for Nootka Challie and that 'ooman. When me find um me kill um. Good! That 'ooman all same lejaub—all same devil!"

For a full minute after he had concluded, nobody spoke. He had told his story simply, in the small stock of English at his command, glossing nothing, stressing nothing; and so it was the more convincing and powerful. It was a tragedy of the wilderness, of love and hate and revenge, simple, elemental; and the end of it was entirely logical, and justifiable according to Indian ideas. I do not think one of us who heard condemned him. Mr. Fothergill expressed our sentiments very aptly.

"By George!" he said. "That woman was not murdered. She was executed!"

And so we buried Nootka and the klootch Lucille together, as seemed fitting, and made another grave for old Hayes and Siwash George. And we portaged the furs and canoes back to the river, and enjoyed a peaceful camp once more.

The next day we saw the last of Ignace Mountain. Murderer or executioner, whichever you like, we shook hands with him, and staked him to an outfit; and I gave him the rifle which had been Siwash George's, to replace his own. He waited for us to embark before getting into his canoe. And when we looked back as we rounded the first bend he was still standing motionless, leaning on his paddle; a lonely figure, staring somberly at the river, seeing I know not what pictures of the past and future in its dark current.

Our homeward journey was entirely uneventful, and I was glad of that, for I had had my fill of adventure. Day after day, in the glorious weather of early fall we swept southward along the water highway of the North, until at last we turned into the slow, brown flood of the Carcajou, and one evening about sundown I saw the logs of my landing.

And there was Peggy, with the fresh wind whipping her skirts and blowing her hair about her

temples, and her eyes warm with welcome and in them a light that was not for me; and old Nelse beside her, jumping up and down and barking himself hoarse; and my uncle and old McClintock, the factor, hurrying down to meet us.

That night we had quite a jollification, and McClintock made us an offer for the furs which seemed very fair and which subsequently his company ratified and we accepted. It gave me more money than—at that time—I knew what to do with.

And with that, to my mind, the story of the finding of the cache of old Nitche McNab ends. I never saw or heard of Ballou or McGregor, or Conover, or the breed again. Perhaps they still live somewhere on the outposts of the great wilderness which is being pushed back year after year. But once I did see Louis Beef. He was cook in a logging camp, and his hair was still black and abundant. He did not know me, for the years had changed my looks; and after thinking it over I decided to let sleeping dogs lie, for in spite of the undoubted fact that he was a scoundrel I always liked him.

Now, having as it seemed to me written all there was to write, I submitted the result to Peggy —I mean the younger Peggy, who is my niece. And she turned up her pretty nose.

"That," said Peggy, "is no way to finish a story."

"But the story is finished," I pointed out. "It ends there. There is nothing more to tell."

"You must always finish the story," said Peggy wisely, "with a love scene. They all do it. And you don't say what became of mother—I mean Peggy, the dear—and Jim Dunleath."

"Nothing became of them. They got married, of course, but any one would know that."

"Nonsense!" said Peggy. "You've left out the real, artistic ending. When old McClintock made that offer for the furs Peggy and Jim weren't there, and you went to look for them to tell him about it. And you found them down by the river, you've told me, standing in the moonlight, and Jim's arm was around her."

"Both arms," I said. "And hers——"

"Very well. And when you told him of McClintock's offer what did he say?"

"He said," I replied, recalling his exact words through the years: " 'The devil take McClintock and the furs! And you get out of here. You ought to know you're a crowd!' "

"That's it," said Peggy, with a soft laugh and a dreamy light in her eyes. "That's the finish—the eternal, unavoidable, logical finish. That's just what father *would* say."

THE END.

OTHER CHELSEA HOUSE BOOKS

THE SHE BOSS *by Arthur Preston Hankins*

Vivid character portrayal, lively, colorful action, and unmistakable evidence that the author knows his subject at firsthand, are some of the salient features of this great Western novel. **Price, $1.75 net**

THE TROUBLE AT PINELANDS

by Ernest M. Poate

The plot of this detective story is so novel, the action so swift and absorbing, that, after reading it, you will declare it "the best mystery tale in years." **Price, $1.75 net**

THE LONG, LONG TRAIL

by George Owen Baxter

Lawful folk generally discountenance bandits. But, in spite of our respect for the law, we admit a great liking for *Jess Dreer*, outlaw and hero of this great outdoor tale. **Price, $1.75 net**

THE BLACK STAR *by Johnston McCulley*

Roger Verbeck swore he would bring to justice both the *Black Star* and his gang. A difficulty arose, however, when he discovered his fiancée and her brother were members. **Price, $1.00 net**

FALCON OF SQUAWTOOTH

by Arthur Preston Hankins

In this novel the author has tapped an untouched field. This he cultivates with such amazing facility, breath, and vigor that you are sure to ask for more. **Price, $1.75 net**

THE UNKNOWN SEVEN

by Harry Coverdale

Who performed the operation which left *Malcolm Reeves* bereft of his reason? If *Doctor Latham* did it, why did he betray certain criminals to the avengers of *Reeves?* **Price, $1,75 net**

QUEMADO *by William West Winter*

Readers of both sexes will enjoy *Quemado* as they have enjoyed no other Western character. Young, attractive, wild, mysterious, and somewhat devilish, he is an exceptionally likable hero. **Price, $1.75 net**

DONNEGAN *by George Owen Baxter*

Like the collision between an irresistible force and an immovable body is the meeting of *Lord Nick* with *Donnegan*. And, as may be imagined from the simile, things "begin to happen." **Price, $1.75 net**

CHELSEA HOUSE

79-89 Seventh Ave. New York City

OTHER CHELSEA HOUSE BOOKS

MONEY TO BURN

by Reginald Wright Kauffman

This is a story of the adventures which befell a medical student "on the beach" in San Domingo, who later became an ally of the U. S. secret service. Out soon. **Price, $2.00 net**

THE BLACK COMPANY

by William Morton Ferguson

Wealthy young *Peter Lawton* discovered two obstacles between himself and happiness. The first, the *Black Company*, was material, but the second was of a far more insidious nature. Out soon.

Price, $2.00 net

RIDER O' THE STARS *by Robert J. Horton*

Was the mysterious new hand a fugitive from justice? *Gordon Hughes*, who prided himself on his good judgment, said "No." Some rapid action proves that he was not far from right. **Price, $2.00 net**

THE RANCH OF THE THORN

by William H. Hamby

After buying a ranch in Mexico, *Neal Ashton* discovered that seven previous owners had disappeared. How *Neal* escaped the fate of the seven makes a thrilling adventure and mystery tale.

Price, $2.00 net

BEHIND LOCKED DOORS

by Ernest M. Poate

Detective-story fans will welcome the advent of a new book by Doctor Poate. This one introduces a thrilling figure in the person of *Doctor Bentiron*, superdetective. **Price, $2.00 net**

MILLIONS IN MOTORS

by William West Winter

In realizing his ambitions, *Joe Lynch* lost all sense of proportion; he worshiped power and wealth. He found, however, that they are worthless without character to guide their use. **Price, $2.00 net**

LOUISIANA LOU *by William West Winter*

Can a man begin a new life at forty? This question is answered in masterly style in this lively and entertaining study of Western character and psychology. **Price, $1.75 net**

CHELSEA HOUSE

79-89 Seventh Ave New York City